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Moral Conflict in Marriage

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Abstract

Moral Conflict in Marriage

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Dyadic conflicts may emerge for a variety of reasons however some conflicts are viewed as more influential than others. Moral conflicts are viewed as particularly critical to relationships due to their possible intractable nature (Vallacher et al., 2010). The first goal of the current study was to examine theoretical perspectives from a variety of academic fields to identify the types of moral conflicts that are experienced in marriage. Secondly, this study addressed the perceived conflict management strategies used by a partner during a specific episode of moral conflict. Lastly, the study investigated how the communication strategies used during a moral conflict contributed to relational satisfaction. The present study surveyed 235 married individuals and found that individuals experienced ten types of moral conflict, some of which may be unique to marriage (e.g., loyalty, authority over assets of equal ownership, free will/determinism). Results also indicated that those who perceived their partner also thought the conflict had a moral nature, were more likely to see their viewpoint as superior, despite indicating that they were able to understand their partner's position. In addition, those who thought that their partner had similar perceptions of the moral nature of a conflict felt that their partner displayed

negative emotions during conflict (e.g., crying, depressed), but did not show behaviors attempting to avoid or deny the conflict. Lastly, individuals who perceived their partner as using integrative strategies were more satisfied with their relationship, whereas those who viewed their partner as using distributive strategies expressed lower levels of relational satisfaction. Findings also demonstrated that people felt less satisfied with their relationship when their partners used avoidance or denial during moral conflict and more satisfied with their relationship when their partner displayed expressions of negative affect. Implications about conceptualizing moral conflict in marriage are discussed as well as suggestions for future inquiry.

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Introduction

Communication scholars generally agree that conflict is inevitable at some point in almost every interpersonal relationship. Although there is no universal definition of conflict (Putnam, 2013), several scholars have argued that conflict can be described as an episode of being challenged by human differences, that occurs when differences matter and are potentially problematic to us (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007). Others have defined conflict as, "An expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals." (Hocker & Wilmot, 1978, p. 9). Dyadic conflicts may emerge for a variety of reasons; however, some conflicts are viewed as more influential than others.

Moral conflicts are often viewed as particularly critical to relationships due to their possible intractable nature (Vallacher, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2010). Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) further explain the nature of moral conflict by indicating that it often involves basic substantive issues that are deeply embedded in the participants' moral orders, making it especially difficult to manage or resolve. Moral orders are defined as individual assumptions about right, wrong, goodness, and virtue that guide individual and social actions (Littlejohn & Cole, 2013). Much of the time, these moral orders are assumed and are viewed as "common sense" (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007). In other words, moral viewpoints become so engrained in a person's belief system that other ways of viewing the same issue may seem absurd or simply erroneous. Thus, through interaction, moral conflicts can emerge, and individuals may be relatively unwilling to compromise or negotiate to resolve them.

Due to the unique nature of moral conflict, this study seeks to investigate how individuals experiencing this type of conflict perceive themselves, their partners, their relationship, and outcomes of the conflict. First, this study attempts to identify the types of moral conflicts that occur in marriage. Further, the role a marital partner plays in shaping how a specific episode of moral conflict is perceived, as well as the potential outcomes that occur when partners' perceptions do not align are explored. This study also seeks to understand the types of conflict strategies that are used by partners during moral conflict and how they are linked to perceptions of conflict intractability (i.e., resistance to resolution, hopelessness, issue centrality, motivation to harm), other moral conflict features (i.e., interminability, moral attenuation, rhetorical attenuation), and marital satisfaction.

Literature Review

Moral Conflict

For decades, researchers have provided various definitions of moral conflict. Most researchers agree that moral conflicts occur over differences in values, beliefs, and opinions about a particular situation (Jormsri, 2004; Littlejohn & Cole, 2013; Peace & Littlejohn, 1997). Moral conflicts have also been described interchangeably by some researchers as moral dilemmas, protracted conflicts, intractable conflicts, and value conflicts (Coleman, 2003; Maise, 2003; Manichander, 2016). Some argue that in order for a conflict to have a moral nature it must be insoluble and involve opposing claims of equal power or importance (Brink, 1994). Others note moral conflict as incommensurate, or two perspectives that cannot be "mapped onto," expressed as, or compared to each other (Berstein, 1985). Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) approach moral conflict through communication theory, describing it as "situations which the social worlds or moral orders (e.g., assumptions about right, wrong, goodness, and virtue that guide individual and social actions) of participants are incommensurate" (p. x). Though these authors and others (Pruitt & Olczak, 1995) recognize that moral differences have the potential to create tension in a marriage, is not always the existence of moral differences that drive and sustain conflict, but rather how efforts to manage these opposing viewpoints generate troubling outcomes. Much of the time, there is an association between the perceived characteristics of a moral conflict, and the positive or negative management of that conflict.

Characteristics of moral conflict. In order to better understand how moral conflict is perceived and managed in interpersonal relationships, Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) identify four primary characteristics that contribute to moral conflict: *intractability, interminability, moral attenuation,* and *rhetorical attenuation*. The first and most influential characteristic of moral conflict is intractability, or individuals' perceptions of a conflict as extremely difficult or impossible to resolve. When a conflict is viewed as intractable, it is also typically perceived as complex, intense, and central to the identities and self-esteem of the individuals involved in the conflict (Coleman, 2000; Maiese, 2003; Vallacher et al., 2010). Though, several scholars argue that most of the time conflicts do not start as having an intractable nature but become this way depending on they are managed (Burgess & Burgess, 2003; Fisher-Yoshida & Wasserman, 2011; Thompson & Nadler, 2000). Further, research shows that if individuals view a conflict as intractable, they will most likely have more difficulty understanding the other persons' values or beliefs and act in a less communicatively constructive manner (Burgess, Burgess, & Kaufman, 2006) than they would otherwise.

The second quality of moral conflict is interminability, or people's tendency to "disagree about the issues, tactics, or potential resolution" (Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997, p. 71). When moral conflicts are interminable, participants have difficulty extending their argument since they perceive that a clear disparity between viewpoints exists. These opposing perceptions of the nature of the conflict, as well as how it should be resolved, (e.g., negotiation, mediation, avoidance, etc.) often lead to moral conflicts having "no terminus" or going "on and on and on" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 6).

The third characteristic of moral conflict is moral attenuation. Moral attenuation suggests that individuals are not only connected to their beliefs, but also perceive their viewpoint as being more virtuous than the viewpoints of others. Individuals involved in moral conflict, in other words, often believe their ideas involve higher moral standards than the ideas of the other person who is involved in the conflict (Fisher-Yoshida & Wasserman, 2011).

The final quality of moral conflict that Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) recognize is rhetorical attenuation, or the tendency of individuals or groups in conflict to speak of the other individual or group in negative terms, as well as each party having limited understanding of the other's moral order. Scholars have argued the destructive communication behaviors and the likelihood of having a restricted understanding of the other party during moral conflict may be attributed to a lack of rhetorical effort by both parties (Freeman, Littlejohn, & Pearce, 1992). In other words, individuals may not try to explain their perspective or the issue in a complete or detailed manner to the other because they assume the opposing party is too ignorant to understand.

Effects of moral conflict. Understanding how moral conflict is influenced by communication behaviors used during the conflict is particularly important because of the substantial impact that perceived communicative behaviors may have on individuals and their relationship (Sillars & Scott, 1983). When managed ineffectively, moral conflicts generate misunderstanding, mistrust, negative stereotyping, hostile communication, and conflict escalation (Maiese, 2003). As Fisher and Keashly (1990) highlight, when conflicts in interpersonal relationships reach an intractable stage, as they frequently do in

moral conflict, the parties involved stop interacting with each other. Further, much of the time individuals begin to dehumanize the other and efforts to resolve the conflict are seen as hopeless. In extreme circumstances, the this may lead to purposely inflicting harm on the other through physical or psychological violence. If not handled in a constructive way, moral conflict may take a toll on human life, mental health, emotional experience, meaning making, and ability to reason (Coleman, 2000; Grunebaum, 1993; Maiese, 2003; McAlister, Sandström, Puska, Veijo, Chereches, & Heidmets, 2001). In an interpersonal setting, moral conflicts that manifest as disputes, grudges, and feuds may lead to the division of a family or deterioration of a friendship.

When moral conflicts are perceived as intractable, they can be viewed as "the most destructive force on the planet" (Burgess et al., 2006, p.183). However, if individuals are able to perceive the conflict and their partner's behaviors during the conflict in constructive ways, it is possible that the duration of these conflicts can be shortened, and resolution can be achieved. Since moral conflicts are often detrimental to trust and cooperative interaction, it is important to further explore the types of moral conflicts experienced by marital partners and how those conflicts are handled by partners when they emerge. Thus, the present study seeks to uncover the types of moral conflict marital partners experience, as well as how the perceived communication strategies used during these interactions affect individual and relational outcomes.

Types of Moral Conflict

Brief history of moral development. One of the first attempts to measure morality was Kohlberg's (1973) Theory of Stages of Moral Development. The theory

identifies six stages of moral reasoning that are grouped into three levels (i.e., pre-conventional, conventional; post-conventional). Kohlberg's theory presents a framework for scholars interested in morality by describing how people use logic to decide whether something is right or wrong. Although the theory provides an explanation for how people develop their ability to make judgments of correct behavior, researchers have identified several other limitations of Kohlberg's model such as possible gender biases (Gilligan, 1982), cultural differences (Miller, 1991; Walker, 1991) and religious differences (McKay & Whitehouse, 2015; Singer, 2011; Zuckerman, 2008) that may influence moral development and the likelihood of moral conflict.

Developing types of moral conflict. Based on the notion that people characterize behavior as moral, a number of scholars have developed frameworks that can be used to assess various types of moral conflict. These approaches include, domains of moral discourse (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997), Relational Model Theory (Fiske, 1991, 1992), Ethics of Care Theory (Gilligan, 1982), Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2013), moral ideals (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swilder & Tiptons, 1985), ethical principles (Josephson, 2002), and moral standards (Taylor, 1989). Although the scholars describing these approaches focus on different populations, contexts, ways of measuring conflict, and ways of labeling common types of moral conflict, several of them have overlapping ideas concerning widely recognized moral concepts (i.e., ideals, factors, principles, standards, etc.).

The current study synthesizes the seven frameworks listed above (i.e., domains of moral discourse, Relational Model Theory, Ethics of Care Theory, Moral Foundations

Theory, moral ideals, ethical principles, and moral standards) into one model to create a cohesive description of the types of moral conflict that may occur in marriage. To accomplish this, each moral concept (e.g., ideals, factors, principles, standards, etc.), in each moral framework (i.e., domains of moral discourse, Relational Model Theory, Ethics of Care Theory, Moral Foundations Theory, moral ideals, ethical principles, and moral standards), were examined to find concepts which overlapped. When the overlapping concepts were analyzed, seven general categories of moral conflict emerged including: *Equality, Utilitarian, Authoritarian, Truthfulness, Autonomy, Community, and Care/Beneficence* (see Figure 1). The labels and definitions of each category were developed based on extant literature and will be described below.

In addition to the seven ideas that seemed to overlap in existing literature (i.e., equality, utilitarian, authoritarian, truthfulness, autonomy, community, and care/beneficence) there were several concepts that did not overlap in the studies mentioned above. The current investigation entertains the possibility that these or other new concepts may emerge that do not fit in the proposed model (e.g., fidelity, intimacy, equal ownership, disclosure). Thus, concepts that did not emerge from existing literature, and potential new concepts, were recognized as possible types of moral conflict during data analysis.

The first type of moral conflict that emerged from the aforementioned analysis is *equality*. This type of conflict is based on concepts of fairness and justice. For example, Gilligan (1982) argues that men tend to focus on making ethical decisions based on principles of justice, which she describes as acting equal, impartial, and following rules.

Similarly, Haidt (2013) describes his moral foundation of "fairness vs cheating" which includes ideas of justice, rights, and proportionality. Others describe ethical principles as "claims of equality" (Taylor, 1989), "fairness" (Josephson, 2002), and "equality matching" (Fiske, 1991, 1992).

The second type of moral conflict is *utilitarian*, or promoting individual interests. Bellah et al. (1985) explain their utilitarian moral ideal as individuals pursuing their wants or desires despite what the common good is. Fiske (1991, 1992) describes a similar idea of market pricing, where people take risks to increase utility for themselves or their group. These efforts to promote interests are action oriented, as opposed to sharing a personal opinion or viewpoint. For example, in marriage one partner may engage in frequent substance abuse, regardless if it negatively influences those around them (e.g., spouse, children).

Thirdly, *authoritarian*, or obedience to authority and respecting those in a higher position of power, is noted by researchers as a basis for moral conflict. Fiske uses the term "authority ranking" in his moral relational model to portray power dynamics and hierarchy such as obeying, respecting, and honoring authority. Similarly, Haidt (2013) also argues for the importance of hierarchy in his "authority vs subversion" foundation to display the dialectical nature of respecting traditions of leadership versus followership. Taking a narrower approach, Bellah et al. (1985) apply the authoritarian ideal to obeying for scriptural or divine authority.

A fourth type of moral conflict is *truthfulness*, or being honest, and upholding promises. Josephson (2002) includes this characteristic in two of his principles (i.e.,

honesty and promise keeping). Haidt (2013) also recognizes a universal value of truthfulness in his moral foundation "loyalty vs betrayal." For instance, Haidt suggests that individuals are expected to remain faithful to and stand up for their group (e.g., family, nation, etc.).

The fifth concept which emerged was *community,* or service and contribution to a group. Though the notion of community may seem similar to Haidt's approach to truthfulness, it differs by focusing on responsibility to a group. In community, there is a moral assumption that people play an active role and contribute to a group. Shweder et al. (1997) describes this as having a duty to a group, because all members are interdependent. Sometimes these roles require individuals to be unselfish and sacrifice for their membership in the group. Fiske (1991a, 1992) echoes this idea in his phrase "communal sharing" which is an ethical responsibility to serve or have a role in the group.

Also relating to the obligation of having a responsibility to others, a sixth type of moral conflict is *care/beneficence*. Care/beneficence involves concern and commitment to not cause physical or psychological pain for others. Gilligan (1982) argues that women have a greater tendency to act in a "caring" way when making moral decisions in order to preserve a relationship, minimize hurt, or show empathy. Josephson (2002) agrees with the importance of this concept in two of his ethical principles (i.e., caring and respect for others). Haidt (2013) builds on this notion of caring for others by showing moral conflict may occur over "care vs harm." Haidt's idea assumes that individuals should dislike others' pain, want to protect them, and that people should be kind and nurturing. Taylor

(1989) takes Haidt's arguement one step further, claiming a moral standard to avoid death and suffering of others.

The final type of moral conflict occurs over violations of *autonomy*, or the ability to be independent and freely express oneself. Shweder et al. (1997) describe autonomy in terms of a person having a sense of free agency, individualism, and the opportunity to pursue personal preferences. Though using different words to define the concept, Taylor (1989) similarly describes autonomy as ethical principles involving freedom and the ability to self-rule. Using a related approach, Bellah et al. (1985) explain their expressivist universal moral ideal as having individual freedom. In line with these scholars, Haidt (2013) mentions his perspective of autonomy through the dialect "liberty vs oppression." Haidt argues, more specifically, that people value individual freedom and resent those who try to dominate others (e.g., bullies, tyranny). Efforts to promote these interests are focused on expressing personal opinions or viewpoints, as opposed to being action orientated.

Importance of Marital Partners' Perceptions and Morality

Considering individuals may experience several different types of moral conflict, it is likely that the way in which individuals perceive these various types of conflict influences their approach to manage the conflict. Individuals come to interpret the meaning of a moral conflict both intentionally and unintentionally based on a variety of factors (e.g., past experiences, context, culture, and personal motives) (Keller, 2006). Differences in relational partners' viewpoints on what is moral or true, may influence their perceptions of their relationship, themselves, and the other.

Influence on the relationship. Some of the most influential interactions that people have are with those they are close to (e.g., marital partners). Scholars have noted that marriage is often viewed as a particularly close relationship because it tends to be a relationship of high commitment and investment (Levinger & Snoek, 1972; Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985). Not only is marriage frequently viewed as the most important relationship in one's life, but individuals also generally believe that commitment to their spouse includes a sense of duty, self-sacrifice, and obligation to partner needs (Adams & Jones, 1999).

When there is a clash between deeply held moral values, partners may begin to question their feelings of commitment, investment, and other relational responsibilities. Instead of prioritizing their relationship, partners may instead find greater value in upholding their own viewpoint. In response to feeling strongly about their position, individuals may be relatively less willing to accommodate, moral conflicts may escalate, and destructive communication may occur. In short, it possible that tensions may arise in the relationship. If the conflict continues to escalate, it may influence how people perceive the state, trajectory, or identity of their relationship.

Influence on the self. In addition, a vast literature has indicated that individuals link their spouses as well as their moral beliefs to their personal identity (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Hecht, 2009). When this identity is challenged, altered, or broken, people struggle to redefine who they are (Lampard & Peggs, 2007). During interpersonal interaction, people use different communication strategies to respond to the other. These verbal and nonverbal displays can be interpreted in a variety

of ways (e.g., positive, negative, neutral) (Honeycutt, Zagacki, & Edwards, 1990). The way in which behaviors from the other are interpreted during conflict, can influence individuals' perceptions of themselves both during and after the conflict. If individuals see these behaviors as contributing to constructive conflict, they may feel that their identity is being supported or strengthened by the other (e.g., feeling empowered, respected, acknowledged, understood). As Oetzel, Dhar, and Kirschbaum (2007) highlight, when transcendent communication is used during conflict, though people's opinions on an issue do not usually change, their perception of self during the interaction does change. By contrast, if individuals feel the other's responses are escalating the conflict, they may begin to have more negative perceptions of themselves (e.g., feeling less confident, criticized, persuaded, frustrated, or unsafe) (Littlejohn, 2004; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). Further, when people interpret communication strategies used by a partner as negative, they may feel a threat to their personal identity (Brown & Levinson, 1978; 1987).

Influence on the other. Aside from affecting views of the relationship and self, different perceptions of a moral issue may also influence how individuals perceive their partner during and after the interaction. Previous literature indicates that people in a moral conflict frequently develop a negative perception of the other during the conflict. Such negative perceptions, in turn, can encourage individuals to attribute negative characteristics to the other. As Littlejohn and Cole (2011) highlight, people frequently perceive the other as irrational, misguided, ignorant, and immoral during a moral conflict.

As such, exploring differences in partners' moral viewpoints may offer insight into understanding individuals' perceptions of the other.

Perceptions of marital partner's behavior during moral conflict and relational outcomes. Individuals' perceptions of their partner's behaviors during moral conflict may also influence their perceptions of the relationship, the types management strategies they use to respond to their partner, and their perceptions of the conflict. The link between the perceptions of responses from a partner and the relationship as a whole has the potential to lead to troubling outcomes such as increased tensions, uncertainty, decreased intimacy, and relational deterioration. However, depending on how behaviors from one partner are perceived by the other, conflict can also be constructive in a relationship (Gottman,1993). As Solomon and Theiss (2007) highlight, the direction in which a relationship develops or is maintained closely aligns with efforts to make sense of that relationship. Similarly, Duck (1995) argues that partners both define and understand their relationship by meanings created from their interactions.

Due to the unique impact individuals' perceptions of their partner may have on their responses to the other, and to the relationship, it is important to understand how to develop ways to experience positively perceived interactions. How individuals experience a moral conflict and reflect on their partner's behaviors during and after the conflict, may predict how a conflict leads to a "constructive process of change and building of relationships" (Lederach, 2005, p. 48) rather than a short-lived solution. Though research suggests that it can be challenging for people to communicate in constructive ways during all types of conflict, it may be especially challenging for people

experiencing a moral conflict (Deutsch, 2011; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Sillars, Parry, Coletti, & Rogers, 1982).

Marital Conflict Strategies

An extensive literature has been devoted to investigating communication conflicts in interpersonal relationships. As Simons (1974) notes, this may be because "communication is the means by which conflict gets socially defined" (p. 3). Though conflict may bring about initial feelings of uncertainty or perceived interference from a partner (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003), Guttman (2003) highlights that the biggest misconception about conflict is that it is intrinsically bad (p. 33). When managed ineffectively, conflict can be destructive (Heyman, 2001); however, when handled in a skilled manner, conflict can be viewed as both positive and productive for a marriage. Research has demonstrated that conflict can be associated with a better understanding of the other, increased intimacy, and relational satisfaction (Gurman & Jacobson, 2002; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). Over time, the conflict literature has advanced from exploring the destructive or constructive nature of conflict to studying the association between certain behavioral strategies during a conflict and destructive or constructive outcomes (Nicotera, 1993).

Direct, indirect, and avoidant conflict strategies. Researchers have explored a multitude of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that may contribute to relational prosperity or degeneration. Some of the most common strategies that have been used to assess impersonal conflict are direct, indirect/avoidant, cooperative, and competitive behaviors. In general, the literature suggests that direct communication is

more often associated with positive relational outcomes than indirect or avoidant communication behaviors. Emmers-Sommer (2003) indicates that when a conflict is due to a violation that has occurred in the relationship, direct and constructive communication is the most effective strategy for repairing and maintaining a relationship. Further, researchers have found that avoiding important conflicts may be linked to conflicts becoming more chronic and severe in the future, as well as a marriage that lacks commitment and growth (McCarthy, Bodnar, & Handal, 2004). However, it is important to note that using direct behaviors or verbally acknowledging a conflict is not always associated with more successful outcomes. In marriages of greater duration, avoiding conflict by changing the subject to something more pleasant may actually allow a relationship to last longer and increase overall satisfaction (Gottman 1999; Holley, Haase, & Levenson, 2013).

Despite some research showing that avoiding conflict can be productive at times (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Roloff & Johnson, 2001), most research suggests that confronting conflict in a marriage is more often associated with relationship satisfaction over time and that avoiding conflict in marriage seems to be a dysfunctional tactic (Gottman, 1994). Researchers have argued that moral conflicts may be avoided on a more frequent basis than other types of conflict due to partners' uncertainty about how to manage or resolve the conflict. Further, some scholars argue that moral conflicts tend to be exacerbated if they are ignored over time (Coleman, 2000; Maiese, 2003).

Cooperative and competitive conflict strategies. Other researchers have described communication during conflicts as either cooperative or competitive. Deutsch

(1949) provides a clear summary of these contrasting concepts when stating, “In a cooperative situation the goals are so linked that everybody 'sinks or swims' together, while in the competitive situation if one swims, the other must sink” (p. 129). Research generally suggests that cooperative efforts during conflict tend to promote more positive relationships and result in greater psychological health for both partners involved as opposed to competitive tactics (Deutsch, 2011; Johnson & Johnson, 2005). Even though it is ideal for partners to have a mutually cooperative outlook (Deutsch, 1969), this may be particularly challenging to achieve in a moral conflict due to the features of moral conflict (i.e., intractability, interminability, moral attenuation, and rhetorical attenuation). In other words, most of the time individuals in these types of conflicts tend to have profound contradicting viewpoints and an inability to understand the other person’s perspective. As a consequence of this lack of understanding, they may communicate in less cooperative and more competitive ways.

Other scholars have elaborated on the literature on cooperative and competitive strategies by recognizing the associations between direct versus indirect/avoidant communication, cooperative versus competitive communication, and constructive versus destructive conflict. For instance, Sillars, Canary, and Tafoya (2004) categorized thirty communication acts into four general conflict strategies (i.e., negotiation, direct fighting, fighting, nonconfrontation) based on the degree to which they were directive versus indirect/avoidant and cooperative versus competitive.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Marital Partners' Perceptions and Morality

Scholars in a broad spectrum of academic fields (e.g., philosophy, psychology, sociology, communication) have investigated why individuals view a particular value, belief, or behavior as moral, and how these perceptions differ among individuals and groups in a variety of contexts. Extant literature on individuals' perceptions of morality primarily investigates how individuals perceive they would react in a hypothetical scenario, how they would judge the behaviors of an unknown/hypothetical person, or comparisons between individuals' perceptions and those of someone who is physically and/or psychologically distant from them (Afifi, McManus, Steuber, & Coho, 2009; Carlo, Eisenberg, & Knight, 1992; Eisenberg, Hofer, Sulik, & Liew, 2014). Often, individuals involved in a conflict view the situation differently, depending on their perceived closeness of the relationship (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). People who perceive a relationship as less close, as opposed to a close relationship, tend to exert less effort to try to understand the perspective of the other (e.g., they engage in limited perspective taking, listening, asking questions) (Decety, 2012; Epley, 2014), perceive the other as being less intelligent and/or less emotional, and often view the other person as lacking the ability to articulate or reason their ideas (Harris & Fiske, 2011).

Perceptions of Conflict as Moral

As Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) state, in moral conflict, "…most people are not able to step out of their own system of thinking to see it as a social construction. Most people do not realize that 'reality' is not immutable truth but a complex and contradictory

set of forces between and among systems of thought" (p. 26). If both partners recognize their individual 'beliefs' as a 'truth' then it is likely that their ability to understand a different viewpoint or find a middle ground will be more challenging. By contrast, if one partner does not feel the conflict is moral, he or she may be more willing to sacrifice his or her viewpoint or passively allow the conflict to settle so that the conflict does not interfere with the satisfaction or stability of the relationship. Although this is a reasonable argument, the association between individuals' perceptions of the agreed upon nature of the conflict as being an issue of morality and their perceptions of the conflict having moral qualities is unknown. Therefore, the following question is presented:

> *RQ1: Is the similarity between individuals' perceptions of a conflict as moral and their view of their partner's perceptions of a conflict as moral associated with their perceptions of the (a) intractability (i.e., difficulty to resolve; issue centrality; motivation to harm), (b) interminability, (c) moral attenuation, and (d) rhetorical attenuation of a moral conflict?*

Moral Conflict

Despite previous literature suggesting that moral conflict may lead to negative outcomes, theory and research on these types of conflicts in an interpersonal setting is still in its infancy (Coleman, Vallacher, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2007). Recently, scholars have started to acknowledge the impact close relationships have on developing moral intuitions and conflict (Haidt, 2008; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Simpson, Farrell, & Marshall, 2016) as well as how differing moral viewpoints between individuals may evoke serial arguments, criticism, defensiveness, heated interactions, inability of conflict

resolution, and instability in romantic relationships (Krebs, Denton, Wark, Couch, Racinev & Krebs, 2002; Simpson et al., 2016) Scholars note is it important to bring greater awareness to differing moral viewpoints in romantic relationships because if they are ignored, partners may "inadvertently insult one another or be seen as being unresponsive" (Simpson et al., 2016, p. 123). Though authors acknowledge the role that communication may play in interpersonal moral conflict, it has received little attention. As Simpson et al. (2016) argue, "Focusing greater theoretical and empirical attention on how couples discuss important moral issues/dilemmas may provide relationship researchers with new insights into when, how, and why relationships grow or fail" (p. 123).

Although scholars have provided a foundation of frameworks that can be used to assess the various types of moral conflict (i.e., Bellah et al., 1985; Fiske, 1991, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Haidt, 2013; Josephson, 2002; Shweder et al., 1997; Taylor, 1989), the utility of these frameworks remains unclear. A close examination of the frameworks suggests that many of the concepts used to describe moral conflicts can be characterized by seven broad categories. These include *equality, utilitarian, authoritarian, truthfulness, community, care/beneficence,* and *autonomy.* While these seven categories likely capture many of the types of moral conflicts experienced by marital partners, there may be other categories. Further, researchers have yet to examine the types of moral conflict experienced by spouses. Given the lack of research on types of moral conflict in marriage, as well as the potential importance of these conflicts, the following RQ was posited:

RQ2: What types of moral conflicts do individuals in marriages experience?

Marital Conflict Strategies

Given that moral conflicts are frequently perceived as complex, intense, and seemingly impossible to resolve, it is possible that the strategies used by partners engaged in these conflicts reflect frustration and a degree of hopelessness. In other words, people may have a tendency to engage in relatively destructive (i.e., distributive, violent/threatening communication) strategies during moral conflict. With that said, it also is possible that the interdependent nature of marriage may discourage couples from engaging in such strategies. Because many married partners rely on each other for emotional, social, and instrumental support (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), they may be motivated to use relatively constructive communication strategies. In short, it is unclear what types of strategies partners will use when engaged in a moral conflict. Thus, the following research question is presented:

RQ3: What types of conflict management strategies are individuals most likely to use when addressing moral conflict?

Since moral conflicts are generally perceived as having challenging characteristics (i.e., they tend to be intractable, interminable, rhetorically attenuated, and morally attenuated), individuals who perceive that their partner also thinks they are engaged in a moral conflict may view the conflict as more severe, difficult to resolve, and communication from their partner as more destructive (Maiese, 2003). In comparison, it is also possible that individuals who perceive that their partner does not agree that they are engaged in a moral conflict may view their partner as demonstrating more avoidant

strategies (i.e., active distancing, avoidance/denial) (Barry, Lawrence, & Langer, 2008; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993).

Further, the relationship between (a) integrative strategies, (b) distributive strategies and perceptions of a conflict as having moral features (i.e., intractable, interminable, rhetorically attenuated, morally attenuated) remains unexplained. In other words, though research has shown that integrative communication strategies are perceived as producing positive outcomes during most types conflict (Sillars et al., 1980; Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984), the challenging nature of a moral conflict may interfere with individuals' ability to see past these difficult features. Despite the possibility that perceptions of moral conflict features (e.g., intractability) may insinuate both negative conflict management and communication outcomes (Coleman, 2000; Maiese, 2003), there is stronger support from extant literature suggesting that integrative strategies during conflict generally initiate more positive perceptions of a conflict (e.g., less difficulty to resolve, better understanding of a partner's viewpoint). In comparison, extant literature has shown that distributive communication may lead to negative outcomes (e.g., inability to resolve a conflict, intentional hurtful language, lack of empathy, difficultly understanding others language) (Maiese, 2003; Sillars et al., 1984; Vangelisti et al., 2009). Thus, in order to support and expand existing literature, the following questions are presented:

RQ4: Is the similarity between individuals' perceptions of a conflict as moral and their view of their partner's perceptions of a conflict as moral associated with the perceived types of conflict strategies being used by their partner?

H1a: There is a negative association between individuals' tendency to perceive their partner as using integrative conflict strategies and their individual perceptions of a moral conflict as (a) intractable (i.e., difficult to resolve; issue centrality; motivation to harm), (b)interminable, (c) morally attenuated, and (d) rhetorically attenuated.

H1b: There is a positive association between individuals' tendency to perceive their partner as using distributive conflict strategies and their individual perceptions of a moral conflict as (a) intractable (i.e., difficult to resolve; issue centrality; motivation to harm), (b)interminable, (c) morally attenuated, and (d) rhetorically attenuated.

As mentioned previously, integrative, distributive, and avoidant behaviors have been assessed quite frequently in the conflict literature (Canary, Cunningham, & Cody, 1988; Cupach, 1980, 1982; Spitzberg, 1994). However, other researchers have suggested that future scholars should explore behaviors associated with negative affect during interpersonal conflict, since it is not always clear how people perceive expressions of emotion (e.g., frustration, insecurity, depression) from their partner (i.e., favorably or unfavorably) (Guerrero et al., 1995). Some scholars have noted that expressions of negative affect from partners can be interpreted as positive and encourage social support when they are perceived as vulnerable negative emotions (e.g., sadness, fear) (Monin, Martire, Schulz, & Clark, 2009). In contrast, others have found that perceived vulnerable negative emotions from a partner may encourage individuals to see their partners as weak and even intensify the conflict (Lemay & Clark, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). Yet others

have argued that expressions of negative affect from a partner are perceived as neutral, but interpreted as positive or negative depending on other conflict strategies that are used during the interaction (Bevan & Hale, 2006; Guerrero et al., 1995).

In addition, scholars have indicated that emotions are understood and acted on in ways that are socially constructed (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997), an issue that is largely unexplored in intractable conflict literature (such as moral conflict) (Coleman, 2003). In other words, displays of emotion may be interpreted differently (e.g., good vs bad, how people should respond to them) depending on factors such as the context and the relationship in which they occur (Averill, 1986). Thus, while some individuals may perceive expressions of negative affect by their significant other as a positive, others may experience a greater struggle to connect with their marital partner based on perceived expressions of negative affect. As researchers have suggested, future research should examine expressions of negative affect as both a unidimensional and multidimensional concept during difficult situations in close relationships. Therefore, the following question is presented to address suggestions made by extant literature in the context of moral conflict:

> *RQ5: What is the association between perceived expressions of negative affect by a partner and an individuals' perception of a moral conflict interaction as (a) intractable (i.e., difficult to resolve; issue centrality; motivation to harm), (b) interminable, (c) morally attenuated, and (d) rhetorically attenuated?*

Marital Satisfaction

Previous literature suggests that satisfied and dissatisfied couples can be distinguished based on the strategies they choose to use when faced with conflict (Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009). Although extant literature has indicated that using integrative strategies during conflict in marriage is associated with greater satisfaction, and using distributive strategies is linked to greater dissatisfaction in the relationship, the association between integrative as well as distributive strategies and relational satisfaction has not been tested in the context of moral conflict. While moral conflicts have some features that are unique in comparison to other types of conflict (i.e., intractable, interminable, morally attenuated, rhetorically attenuated), the behaviors used to effectively manage these types of conflict may still be similar to other types of conflict. If findings from the current study are consistent with existing conflict literature, this may provide direction for future researchers to continue to explore how specific integrative tactics may be used to transcend these types of conflicts.

Further, the degree to which each of the four characteristics of moral conflict (i.e., intractability, interminability, moral attenuation, rhetorical attenuation) is linked to integrative or distributive strategies is unclear. Although research has not systematically examined the association between characteristics of moral conflict and integrative or distributive strategies, it is possible that one of the characteristics or a combination of the characteristics may be associated with the perceived positive or negative communication strategies used during a moral conflict. Examining the association between perceived characteristics of moral conflict and the conflict management strategies that individuals perceive their partner used is important because this may contribute to understanding how

perceptions during episodes of moral conflict are associated with satisfaction in marriage. Therefore, in order to better understand the relationship between the perceived strategies used during a moral conflict and how they may influence relational satisfaction, the following predictions and research question were put forth:

H2a: There is a positive association between individuals' perceptions of their partner's integrative strategies to manage a conflict and relationship satisfaction.

H2b: There is a negative association between individuals' perceptions of their partner's distributive strategies to manage a conflict and relationship satisfaction.

RQ6: What is the association between the use of active distancing, avoidance/denial, violent communication, and negative affect strategies with relationship satisfaction?

Method

Participants

This study includes United States residents (*N*= 235) who reported being currently married and cohabitating with their significant other. The sample consisted of 83 (35.3%) males and 152 females (64.7%), with ages ranging from 18 to 34 (*M*=37.29; *Mdn*=34; *SD*=11.95). A majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian (77.4%), followed by Black/African American (11.9%), Asian/Pacific Islander (14.6%), Hispanic/Latino (5.1%) and American Indian/Alaskan Native (2.6%). No minimum duration of marriage was required to participate in the study (*M*=10.62 years; *SD*=10.96). About a quarter of participants indicated as having a previous marriage with someone other than their current partner (*N*=55; 23.4%).

Of the original sample (*N*= 273), 13.9% of participants were excluded because they indicated that they had not experienced a moral conflict in marriage (*N*=17), that they could not recall a face-to-face interaction of moral conflict (*N*=3), or failed attentions checks (e.g., "please choose '4' for this item") (*N*=11). Further, after completing the study measures, 7 participants were excluded for reporting "no" when asked whether they answered honestly and if their data should be retained or deleted without penalty (Rouse, 2015).

Procedure

Participants were recruited using the online crowdsourcing platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and were compensated $0.45 for their participation. Samples collected from Mechanical Turk have been demonstrated to be equally reliable and more

diverse than traditional Internet (e.g., online forums and websites, email invitations, internet panels) and U.S college student samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Further, MTurk workers were required to have a minimal approval rating of 95%. The survey itself was presented though the online data collection website Qualtrics.

Upon consent, participants were given access to the online survey. First participants were asked to report their basic demographic information (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, etc.) as well as the number of biological children (M = 1.35; SD = 1.25) and step children (M= .50; SD= 1.14) they had. Further, several questions in this section (which will be described later) were asked and included as control variables to identify their potential influence on results (e.g., marital duration/previous marriage, similar cultural background, similar religious beliefs).

Next, individuals were asked to recall the details of a particularly memorable interaction focused on a moral conflict they had in their marriage. The purpose of asking participants about a memorable interaction was to reduce recall bias. People tend to be better able to recall social interactions that they find relatively memorable (Metts, Sprecher, & Cupach, 1993). In addition to prompting respondents for this brief description, several questions (described in the coming pages) about the moral conflict were asked and included as control variables (i.e., time since episode, event importance).

The following section asked participants to respond to measures assessing the features of moral conflict (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). Participants also were presented with scales designed to assess the conflict strategies they perceived were used by their partners during the conflict. Lastly, individuals were required to respond to questions

regarding their relational satisfaction. A few additional questions were asked for use in future studies. Upon completing the survey, respondents were directed to a final page thanking them for their participation in the study.

Measures

Description of moral conflict. First, participants were presented with the definition of moral conflict: *A clash between you and your partner based on differences in deeply held philosophical assumptions about being, knowledge, or the world (e.g., assumptions about right, wrong, goodness, or virtue).* Next, they were asked to think about a moral conflict they had with their spouse and to provide a description recalling the details of a memorable interaction with their partner that involved the moral conflict.

Upon describing the moral conflict, participants were asked to explain why they thought they had a disagreement with their partner about the moral issue and to describe the topic of the moral conflict. Respondents were also asked to indicate how they realized they had different moral perspectives (i.e., how the conflict emerged), whether they knew about the conflict prior to the interaction, and whether they believed their partner also thought this was a moral conflict (i.e., *To what extent do you believe your partner also felt this conflict was of a moral nature; To what extent do you feel your partner believed this was a conflict over deeply held philosophical assumptions about being, knowledge, or the world*?) (α= .81; M = 4.41; SD = 1.77).

Features of moral conflict. To assess the features of the moral conflict (i.e., intractability, interminability, moral attenuation, rhetorical attenuation) (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997), several measures were used. As noted previously, Pearce and Littlejohn

only provided definitions for moral conflict features and did not provide a way to measure these features. Thus, the first feature of moral conflict (i.e., intractability) was assessed using an empirically tested measurement of intractable conflict applicable to interpersonal relationships (Waite Miller & Roloff, 2006). Given that there are no existing measures that approximate the remaining three features identified by Pearce and Littlejohn, items were created to assess those features.

The Waite Miller and Roloff (2006) measure, used to assess intractability, includes six factor: hopelessness, resistance to resolution, issue centrality, intensity, motivation to harm, and length of conflict.[1] Hopelessness is assessed with three items (i.e., *I feel hopeless regarding the chance that this conflict would ever be resolved, Any attempt to resolve this conflict is doomed to fail, The future of this conflict is bleak);* resistance to resolution with three items (i.e., *So far I haven't found anything that will resolve this conflict*, *Nothing will work to resolve the conflict, Anything I try to resolve this conflict fails*); issue centrality with three items (i.e., *The issue that my partner and I are fighting about is central to my beliefs, How important to your life is the issue you and your partner are fighting about, To what extent do you feel that the issue you and your partner are arguing about is very significant to your life*); intensity with two items (i.e.,

[1]Although issue centrality and motivation to harm were not found to be significantly associated with intractable conflict as opposed to other types of conflict in the one study conducted by Waite-Miller and Roloff (2006), it is possible that these results may vary when tested in a different interpersonal context. Thus, all six factors were included for preliminary analysis of this study.

These arguments are very heated when they occur, When you and your partner argue about this issue, how intense are the arguments); motivation to harm with two items (i.e., *I try to hurt my partner's feelings when we discuss this topic, When this topic comes up, to what extent do you try to upset your partner*); and length of conflict with one item (i.e., *How long has this argument been going on?*).

Several adjustments were made to the wording of Waite Miller and Roloff's (2006) items to reflect a previous episode of conflict as opposed to an ongoing conflict that has not been resolved. First, one item for resistance to resolution (i.e., *So far I haven't found anything that will resolve this conflict*) was replaced with *I felt this conflict was difficult to resolve*. Secondly, two items for issue centrality were modified (i.e., *How important to your life is the issue you and your partner are fighting about* was replaced with *This issue was important to my life*; *To what extent do you feel that the issue you and your partner are arguing about is very significant to your life* was changed to *This issue was significant to my life*) and one item for intensity was changed (i.e., *When you and your partner argue about this issue, how intense are the arguments* was replaced with *This interaction was intense*). Other minor modifications to wording were made to the remaining items to measure perceptions of conflict during one interaction rather than overall perceptions of all interactions of a single continuous conflict (e.g., *Nothing I tried would work to resolve the conflict* was changed to *Nothing will work to resolve this conflict; This argument was very heated* was replaced with *These arguments are very heated when they occur*). All items for this study were measured using a 7-point Likert-

type scale (1=*strongly disagree*; 7=*strongly agree*) as opposed to the original study which used a 9-point scale, to keep a consistent method of measurement (see Appendix A).

In addition to the aforementioned modifications, an adapted version of Waite Miller and Roloff's (2006) sixth factor (i.e., length of conflict) was used and relabeled as *time*. *Time* was assessed in the current study to reflect conflicts which may be resolved, as opposed to conflicts that are indefinitely still present in the relationship. First, participants were asked whether or not the conflict is still present in the relationship (yes or no). If participants reported "yes," they reported how long the argument had been going on.[2] If participants answered "no," they were asked to indicate the approximate duration of the moral conflict before it was resolved listed in weeks, months, or years (e.g., If the conflict lasted 1.5 years it would be 1 year, 6 months 0 days). The last adjustment made to Waite Miller and Roloff's (2006) original measure was the exclusion of two factors (i.e., inactivity; pervasiveness). These items were not included in the current study because they only relate to conflicts that are ongoing.

As previously noted, to the researcher's knowledge, scales have not been developed to measure perceived interminability, moral attenuation, or rhetorical attenuation. Thus, items were created to assess these three features of moral conflict. Respondents answered five items for interminability (e.g., *My partner and I had different viewpoints, My partner and I disagreed about the issue*) as well as four items for moral attenuation (e.g., *My viewpoint was more virtuous than my partner's viewpoint, My*

[2] This is original single item measure for *length of conflic*t used by Waite Miller and Roloff's (2006)

position had higher moral standards than my partner's position), and four items for rhetorical attenuation (e.g., *It was difficult to understand my partner's viewpoint, I had limited understanding of my partner's moral perspective*). Participants rated each of these items on a 7-point Likert type scale (1=*strongly disagree*; 7=*strongly agree*) (see Appendix A).

Conflict strategies. In order to assess conflict strategies used during the episode, an adapted version of the Interactive Responses to Jealousy Scale developed by Guerrero et al., (1995) was used (see Appendix B). Although the measure was originally designed to assess individual reaction to jealousy, a number of researchers have employed it to measure responses to conflict (Carson & Cupach, 2000; Guerrero & Afifi, 1998; Knobloch & Solomon, 2003). The original scale includes 31 questions measuring interactive responses to jealousy that are characterized by six factors. These factors include: five items for Active Distancing (i.e., *Physically pulled away from me, Gave me cold or dirty looks*); six items for Negative Affect Expression (i.e., *Displayed insecurities to me, Appeared hurt in front of me*); five items for Integrative Communication (i.e., *Explained his/her viewpoint to me, Disclosed his/her moral viewpoint to me*); five items for Distributive Communication (i.e., *Yelled or cursed at me, Acted rude toward me*); five items for Avoidance/Denial (i.e., *Got quiet and didn't say much, Became silent around me*); and four items for Violent Communication Threats (i.e., *Used physical force, Threatened to harm me*). Participants in the current study used 7-point Likert-type scales to indicate the degree to which they agreed with the items. One of the items assessing Integrative Communication was reworded from "jealous feelings" to "moral viewpoint"

to fit the current study (i.e., *Disclosed jealous feelings* was changed to *Disclosed his/her moral viewpoint to me*). One item from Active Distancing (i.e., *Stopped calling or initiating communication with me*) and one item from Avoidance/Denial (i.e., *Denied feeling jealous)* were excluded from this study because they address responses to a future interaction. Each factor had an acceptable alpha reliability (active distancing =.90; negative affect expression = .84; integrative communication = .84; distributive communication= .94; avoidance/denial = .84; violent communication = .97).

Upon completing the conflict strategies measure, participants were asked two questions to control for possible recall bias. Respondents were asked to rate the following items using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1=*not confident at all*, 7=*completely confident*): *Please indicate your degree of confidence in accurately remembering the behaviors that your partner displayed during this particular interaction* (*M*= 5.98; *SD*= 1.18) and *Please indicate your degree of confidence in accurately remembering your overall perceptions of this conflict* (*M*= 6.03; *SD*= 1.16). The alpha reliability for these two items was .82.

Relational satisfaction. The Marital Opinion Questionnaire (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986) was used to measure marital satisfaction (see Appendix C). First, participants were asked to think about their relational life with their partner over the last two months and answer ten 7-point semantic differential scale items (e.g., "miserable-enjoyable") (*M* = 4.89; *SD* = 1.57). Next, respondents indicated how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with their relationship with this person over the last two months (*M* = 4.76; *SD* = 1.90) using a similar 7-point scale (i.e., completely satisfied-completely

dissatisfied) (α for the main scale items = .95; correlation between the average of the main scale items and the general satisfaction rating r = .73, p< .000).

In addition to the Marital Opinion Questionnaire (MOQ), individuals were asked how the outcome of the moral conflict described affected their satisfaction in their current relationship. This was measured using a semantic differential scale ranging from decreased my satisfaction to increased my satisfaction (1=*decreased my satisfaction*, 4=*has not affected my satisfaction,* 7=*increased my satisfaction*) (M = 3.76; SD = 1.50).

Control variables. Aside from the measures already listed, additional control variables were assessed. Spouses were asked to report the duration of their current marriage (listed in years and months) and whether or not they had been previously married (yes or no). These two variables were assessed because experience dealing with marital conflict (both of a moral nature and not of a moral nature) may influence the strategies employed during conflict as well as partners' satisfaction with the relationship. Additionally, individuals who have experienced engaging in conflict with their significant other over a longer period of time may be more accustomed to their partner's conflict strategies.

Next, individuals were asked to note the degree to which they perceived their partner as having a cultural background (M= 5.00; SD= 1.70) and religious beliefs (M= 4.78; SD=1.92) that were similar to theirs. Further, respondents also reported the extent to which their religious (M= 4.60; SD=2.18) and cultural beliefs (M= 4.82; SD=1.64) were important to them. Based on prior research, religious and cultural backgrounds have been found to influence both moral viewpoints and strategies used during conflict (Haidt,

2013; Miller, 1991; Walker, 1991). These variables were measured using a two item, 7-point Likert-type scale (1=*not similar at all*, 7=*extremely similar*; 1=*not important at all*, 7=*extremely important*).

The degree of salience that the moral conflict had for participants was also controlled for in this study. It is possible that those who do not perceive the conflict as a major event may use different conflict strategies than those who find the conflict more meaningful (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003). This was assessed using a five-item measure of event importance (Afifi & Metts, 1998). Respondents rated each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale (e.g., *This was very important relationship event, This was a major relationship event, This was a significant relationship event*) (see Appendix D). The scale demonstrated good reliability (α= .90; M= 4.89; SD= 1.77).

Another relevant factor that was controlled for was the amount of time that had passed since the conflict episode had occurred. Given that this study asked individuals to recall behaviors that occurred during a previous event, it is possible that individuals' memory of these behaviors had changed over time. Therefore, individuals were asked to indicate approximately how long ago the interaction occurred listed in days, months, and years (e.g., A conflict that lasted 3.5 months prior to survey completion would be 0 years, 3 months, and 15 days). Participants described moral conflict episodes which occurred on average 3.38 years prior to taking the survey (SD= 6.94). All of the variables described in this section were controlled for during the analysis of RQ1, RQ4, RQ5, R6, H1, and H2.

Other variables. A number of other variables were included in this study as exploratory measures for future studies. For instance, respondents were asked to recall

and describe a memorable serious conflict with their partner that was not of a moral nature. Participants were also asked whether or not third-party assistance was used to resolve the dispute (e.g., counseling, mediation, facilitation, family intervention) and if the difference was focused solely on disagreements within the dyad or if the focus of the issue was a third party (or parties).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Before conducting the main analyses for the study, the characteristics of moral conflict were explored by computing a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. The factor loadings and scree plot were used to determine the ideal solution. Although the eigenvalues suggested that a five-factor solution may be optimal, a further examination of the factor loadings and scree plot indicated that a six-factor solution offered a better theoretical description of the data. Four of the 26 items were dropped due to low or double loadings. These items included the only two items measuring intensity *(i.e., This argument was very heated; This interaction was intense*) and two items measuring moral attenuation (i.e., *My partner thought their beliefs were superior; My partner thought their ideas were right*). The remaining items associated with the six-factor solution account for 79.39% of the variance. The factor loading, eigenvalue, percent of variance explained, mean, standard deviation, and alpha reliability for each factor are reported in Table 1.

The first factor was labeled "difficulty to resolve." It included three items which measured "resistance to resolution" and three items that tapped "hopelessness" in Waite-Miller and Roloff's (2006) measure of intractability. The items that comprised this factor suggested that the moral conflict was irresolvable and attempts to resolve the conflict were hopeless. The second factor was classified as "issue centrality." The items loading on this factor reflected the degree to which individuals found the moral conflict important to their life and central to their beliefs. "Motivation to harm," the third factor, indicated

behaviors that participants and their partner engaged in to intentionally upset one another during the conflict. The fourth factor was called "interminability." The five items that made up this factor revealed the extent to which individuals perceived their partner and themselves as having different viewpoints or positions about the topic. Interminability also included the degree to which partners had a similar perception about how to resolve or manage the conflict. "Moral attenuation" was the label of the fifth factor. For this factor, individuals expressed the extent to which they perceived their viewpoint as having higher moral standards or being more virtuous than their partner's position. The last factor, "rhetorical attenuation," emphasized the extent to which individuals understood their partner's viewpoint on the moral issue. Respondents reported how clear they felt their partner's argument was and the how ambiguous they perceived their partner's language to be.

Main Analysis

Research question one. The first research question asked whether the similarity between individuals' perceptions of a conflict as moral and their view of their partner's perceptions of a conflict as moral were associated with perceptions of moral conflict features. To explore this question, six hierarchical regressions were conducted for each of the features identified by the factor analysis (i.e., difficulty of resolution, issue centrality, motivation to harm, interminability, moral attenuation, rhetorical attenuation). In each case, one of the features of moral conflict served as the dependent variable. The aforementioned control variables were entered into the equation in the first step and the other features of moral conflict were controlled by entering them in the second step.

Results indicated a negative association between the similarity of partners' perceptions and rhetorical attenuation while controlling for the remaining characteristics of moral conflict (i.e., difficulty of resolution, issue centrality, motivation to harm, interminability, moral attenuation) (F[1, 218] = 8.6, p = .004). In addition, while controlling for other characteristics of moral conflict (i.e., difficulty of resolution, issue centrality, motivation to harm, interminability, rhetorical attenuation) a positive association was found between the similarity of individuals' perceptions of a conflict as moral and their view of their partner's perceptions of a conflict as moral and moral attenuation *(*F[1, 218] = 5.22, p = .02). Table 2 includes the standardized beta weights for each moral conflict feature the R squared change for each step of the regressions.

Research question two. RQ2 sought to explore the types of moral conflicts that individuals experience in their marriage. To examine RQ2, moral conflicts were examined by the primary researcher. First, approximately 75% of the data were carefully reviewed to get a better sense of the types of moral conflicts people experienced in their marriage and if they generally aligned with the model suggested for this study. This process included examining open-ended descriptions of the specific episode of moral conflict, individuals' perceptions of how they would describe the topic of the conflict, why they believed there was disagreement over this issue, and how the conflict emerged. During the initial review of these data, three additional types of moral conflict surfaced.

After this initial review of the participants responses, the primary researcher coded the responses into ten types of moral conflict. These included the seven categories that were created for this study (i.e., equality, utilitarian, authoritarian, truthfulness,

autonomy, community, care/beneficence) and three new categories that came about when the data were reviewed (i.e., loyalty, authority over assets of equal ownership, free will/determinism). The first of the three new categories of moral conflict that emerged was labeled "loyalty." Participants who described disagreements over loyalty focused on physical and/or emotional betrayal, unfaithful behavior, and abandoning commitments or promises that were made in the relationship. [3] The second category that emerged was labeled "authority over assets of equal ownership." Couples who reported disagreements in this category, frequently described conflicts over different opinions and/or approaches to managing equally held entities (e.g., children, finances). Lastly, the third category was titled "free will/determinism." Though participants reported experiencing issues over free will/determinism less frequently than any other type of moral conflict, the descriptions of these conflicts were unique from the other categories. These included disagreements over whether or not someone had a voluntarily choice to be/act a certain way versus someone who had no control over their situation (e.g., individual characteristics, tendencies, behaviors, circumstances). For example, one partner may believe a family member is choosing to identify as homosexual, while the other partner in the marriage thinks this person is not choosing their sexual orientation and was born as a homosexual.

Although a majority of participants described only one type of moral conflict, there were several instances where more than one type of moral conflict was provided.

[3] Though this term was originally included in the description of "truthfulness," there were clear differences between the two concepts (described in the discussion section for this paper). For instance, individuals who had moral conflicts over "truthfulness" focused on issues over concealing information, theft, cheating by action (not of an intimate nature), and lying (i.e., both lies of commission and omission).

The predominant type of conflict was coded by assessing participants' responses to four separate questions listed previously (i.e., a detailed description of the moral conflict episode; their perceptions of why they had a disagreement about this moral issue; how they would describe the topic of the moral conflict; how the conflict emerged). The inclusion of the four items, as opposed to only reading a description of the conflict, allowed for a more cohesive assessment about how a person perceived the type of moral conflict, regardless of the topic. For example, in their description participants may have explained a scenario about different financial views with their spouse. A vague response with this information alone could have been interpreted by a coder as fitting into multiple categories. However, details from other questions (e.g., that they had the disagreement about this moral issue because their partner cheated on taxes and then hid this information from them) made the type of moral conflict clear (i.e., truthfulness).

When the first coder completed coding all of the data, a second coder was provided with definitions for each of the ten categories and asked to code approximately 25% of the data. After the second coder categorized her portion of the data, both coders reviewed the data together and discussed responses that were unclear or disagreed upon. The reliability of the coding procedure was checked using Cohen's Kappa (Kappa = .94).

Upon analysis 4.7% (*N*= 11) of the responses were excluded for not answering the question appropriately (e.g., typing random words/letters) or providing vague answers (e.g., *My thoughts and my assumptions*). Of the remaining 224 participants, results indicated that spouses experienced conflicts over truthfulness (*N*= 30; 13.4%), authority over assets of equal ownership (*N*= 30; 13.4%), autonomy (*N*= 29; 12.9%) and loyalty

(*N*= 28; 12.5%) most frequently. The remaining types of moral conflict by order of frequency are as follows: community (*N*= 24; 10.7%), equality (*N*= 22; 9.8%), authoritarian (*N*= 21; 9.4%), utilitarian (*N*= 18; 8.0%), care/beneficence (*N*= 18; 8.0%), and free will/determinism (*N*= 4; 1.8%). Table 3 provides an example from participants' open-ended descriptions of the interaction for each type of moral conflict.

Research question three. The third research question asked what types of conflict management strategies individuals perceived their partners were most likely to use when addressing moral conflict. People reported that their partners used integrative strategies most frequently (*M*= 4.65; *SD*= 1.48), followed by expressions of negative affect (*M*=3.56; *SD*= 1.50), distributive (*M*=3.38; *SD*=1.93), active distancing (*M*= 3.33; *SD*=1.76), avoidance/denial *(M*= 3.23; *SD*= 1.69), and violent communication (*M*= 1.82; *SD*= 1.56) strategies.

Research question four. RQ4 asked whether the similarity between individuals' perceptions of a conflict as moral and their view of their partner's perceptions of a conflict as moral was associated with perceived types of conflict strategies used by their partner. To examine this, six hierarchical regressions were conducted, one for each conflict strategy (i.e., active distancing, negative affect expression, integrative communication, distributive communication, avoidance/denial, violent communication). Each regression had three steps. The extent to which individuals perceived their partners as having similar viewpoints about the moral nature of a conflict served as the dependent variable. In the first step, the eight aforementioned control variables were included (i.e., marital duration, time since conflict had occurred, similar cultural and religious

background, cultural and religious importance, event importance, previous marriage). [4] The second step of the regression included five of the six communication strategies. The remaining communication strategy being tested was entered into the equation in the third step. Standardized beta coefficients were reviewed to determine the direction of the association between the dependent variable and isolated independent (step 3) variable. Lastly, R-squared change was inspected to interpret the proportion of variance for each step of the regression.[5]

Results demonstrated a positive association between the similarity of individuals' perceptions of a conflict as moral and their view of their partner's perceptions of a conflict as moral and negative affect, while controlling for the remaining conflict strategies (i.e., active distancing, integrative communication, distributive communication, avoidance/denial, violent communication) (F[1, 218] = 24.65, p < .000). In addition, there was a negative association between partners' similarity of conflict as having a moral nature and avoidance/denial strategies (F[1, 218] = 8.48, p = .004). Table 4 contains the standardized beta weights and for each moral conflict strategy as well as the relevant figures for R squared change.

Hypothesis one. H1a posited that there would be a negative association between individuals' tendency to perceive their partner as using integrative conflict tactics and their perceptions of a moral conflict as intractable (i.e., difficult to resolve; issue

[4] These eight variables (i.e., marital duration, time since conflict had occurred, similar cultural and religious background, cultural and religious importance, event importance, previous marriage) were used as control variables for Step 1 in RQ1, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6, H1a, H1b, H2a, and H2b.

[5] The same analysis procedure was used to examine regressions for RQ1, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6, H1a, H1b, H2a, and H2b.

centrality; motivation to harm), interminable, morally attenuated, and rhetorically attenuated. To examine this question, a similar hierarchical regression was conducted to explore the association between each moral conflict factor and the dependent variable (i.e., integrative conflict strategies). Similar to the analysis conducted for RQ4, the eight control variables were entered in step 1 of the equation. In step 2, the other moral conflict features (not including the feature used in step 3) were controlled for as independent variables.

Results demonstrated partial support showing a significant negative association between integrative strategies and motivation to harm ($F[1, 218] = 4.61$, $p = .03$) while controlling for other moral conflict features (i.e., difficulty to resolve; issue centrality; interminability, moral attenuation, and rhetorical attenuation).

H1b predicted that there would be a positive association between individuals' tendency to perceive their partner as using distributive conflict tactics and their perceptions of a moral conflict as intractable (i.e., difficulty to resolve; issue centrality; motivation to harm), interminable, morally attenuated, and rhetorically attenuated). This hypothesis was analyzed using an approach similar to the one employed to examine H1a. However, the measure of distributive communication strategies was used as the dependent variable.

The analysis indicated statistically significant positive associations between distributive strategies and two factors of intractability: difficulty to resolve ($F[1, 218] = 5.60$, $p < .02$) and motivation to harm ($F[1, 218] = 108.45$, $p < .000$), while controlling

for the remaining factors listed above.[6] Tables 5.1 and 5.2 include the standardized beta weights and the *R* squared change for each feature of moral conflict.

Research question five. RQ5 asked whether there was an association between perceived expressions of negative affect by a partner and individuals' perceptions of moral conflict characteristics (i.e., difficulty of resolution, issue centrality, motivation to harm, interminability, moral attenuation, rhetorical attenuation). To answer this, six hierarchical regressions were conducted, one for each of the moral conflict characteristics (i.e., difficulty of resolution, issue centrality, motivation to harm, interminability, moral attenuation, rhetorical attenuation). The dependent variable for each of the regressions was participants' perceived expressions of negative affect. In addition to the control variables previously mentioned for step 1, step 2 control variables included five of the six moral conflict factors. The final step included the moral conflict factor that was being tested.

Results indicated a positive link between perceived expressions of negative affect and two factors of intractability: issue centrally ($F[1, 218] = 11.60$, $p = .001$) and motivation to harm ($F[1, 218] = 13.17$, $p < .000$). Table 6 contains the standardized beta weights for all moral conflict characteristics and the *R* squared change for each step.

Research question six. RQ6 asked about the association between relational satisfaction and conflict strategies (i.e., active distancing, avoidance/denial, violent

[6] In addition to step 1 control variables, the five moral conflict features that were controlled while assessing difficulty to resolve were: issue centrality, motivation to harm, interminability, moral attenuation, and rhetorical attenuation. The five moral conflict features that were controlled for while examining motivation to harm were: difficulty of resolution, issue centrality, interminability, moral attenuation, and rhetorical attenuation.

communication, and negative affect). Similar to the analysis used to examine RQ5, three-step hierarchical regressions were used to address this question. For these four regressions, relational satisfaction was the dependent variable, step 1 included the eight control variables used in the aforementioned regressions, step 2 included five of the six communication strategies mentioned in RQ4, and the last step was the communication strategy that was being tested.

Results of the regression indicated that while controlling for all other conflict strategies (i.e., active distancing, integrative, distributive, avoidance/denial, violent communication) there was a positive relationship between expression of negative affect ($F[1, 218] = 6.82$, $p = .01$) and satisfaction in the relationship. Further, there was a negative association between avoidance/denial strategies ($F[1, 218] = 8.69$, $p = .004$) and relational satisfaction. Table 7 displays the standardized beta weights and the *R* squared change for each of the six conflict strategy categories (including integrative and distributive strategies which will be discussed in hypothesis two), and the *R* squared change for each step of the regression analysis.

Hypothesis two. H2a predicted that individuals' perceptions of their partner's integrative strategies would be positively associated with their satisfaction in the relationship. Similarly, H2b anticipated that individuals' perceptions of their partner's distributive strategies would be negatively associated with their relational satisfaction. The same regression described in RQ6 was used to analyze the association between marital satisfaction and (a) integrative and (b) distributive communication strategies.

Both H2a (F[1, 218] =7.97, p = .005) and H2b (F[1, 218] =19.73, p < .000) were supported (see Table 7).

Discussion

Marriage is often recognized as the most important relationship in an individual's life. Further, moral conflicts are commonly acknowledged among the most significant and challenging types of conflicts (Maiese, 2003; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). Due to the substantial impact one's spouse and moral conflict may have on an individual, the current study was conducted to explore the types of moral conflicts individuals in marriage experience. Another purpose of this study was to understand how individuals experiencing moral conflict perceive themselves, their partners, and their relationship both during and after a moral conflict. Integrating existing measures of moral conflict, with individuals' reports of the communication strategies their partners used during the conflict, allowed for an in-depth analysis of how individuals both perceive and experience moral conflict in their marriage.

Conclusions drawn from the six research questions and two hypotheses examined in this study indicated that individuals are able to confidently recall an episode of moral conflict in their marriage. Further, results showed that several positive and negative relationships exist between individuals' perceptions of a moral conflict, themselves, their partner, and their relationship. The first research question revealed that people who believed that their partner also thought that they were engaged in a moral conflict, were more likely to view the conflict as morally attenuated and less likely to perceive the conflict as rhetorically attenuated. In other words, people who perceived that both they and their partner identified the conflict as a moral conflict tended to feel that their viewpoint was more virtuous than their partner's viewpoint, while indicating that they

were still able to clearly understand their partner's argument. An interpretation of this finding may be that perceptions of similarity are less likely to be influenced by a lack of understanding and more likely to be linked to individuals' unyielding perceptions of their viewpoints as superior. The results of this study, however, do not indicate the relationship between perceptions of (a) moral attenuation and (b) rhetorical attenuation. Thus, additional research is needed to test this claim. Interestingly, perceptions of whether or not both people thought that they were in a moral conflict, were not associated with perceptions of intractability or interminability. In other words, no relationship was found between individuals' perception that both they and their partner saw the conflict as moral and how difficult it was to resolve the conflict, how important the conflict was, intentional hurtful messages towards each other during the conflict, and their perceptions of having a different viewpoint on the issue than their partner's viewpoint. These results imply that individuals' perceptions of whether their partner agrees with them about the moral nature of a conflict is only associated with some of the characteristics of moral conflict.

Findings from RQ2 suggest that individuals experience ten types of moral conflicts: equality, utilitarian, authoritarian, truthfulness, autonomy, community, care/beneficence, loyalty, authority over assets of equal ownership, and free will/determinism. Among these, individuals reported memorable moral conflicts over truthfulness and authority over assets of equal ownership most frequently. Issues over autonomy and loyalty followed closely behind with only one or two fewer responses.

If, as the literature suggests, lying and deception are often viewed as unacceptable behaviors in romantic relationships (West, 2006), it is not particularly startling that truthfulness was one of the top reported types of moral conflicts in the current study. Further, research also indicates that people often avoid talking about expectations of honesty with others and when different perceptions of honesty emerge, individuals often struggle with conflicts regarding this topic throughout the course of their relationship (Roggensack & Sillars, 2014). Similarly, these findings align with existing literature which suggests that infidelity (included in loyalty) and lying (included in truthfulness) are perceived among the worst transgressions a person can commit against their romantic partner (Burgoon, Buller, Dillman, & Walther, 1995; Cameron, Ross, & Holmes, 2002; West, 2006). If, in fact, individuals view infidelity and lying as serious transgressions, they may see conflicts involving issues associated with infidelity or lying as having features of moral conflict (i.e., difficult to resolve, important to their beliefs, hurtful communication, interminable, morally attenuated, rhetorically attenuated).

It is noteworthy that, prior to the analyses conducted for the current study, loyalty and truthfulness were treated as a single category. However, the present study revealed that in marriage, it may be most useful to examine truthfulness and loyalty as two separate types of moral conflict. Though previous literature suggests that these ideas should be examined as one category, a majority of this literature focuses on individuals in more distant relationships. Thus, extant literature on moral conflict rarely reports acts of physical (e.g., sexual infidelity) or emotional betrayal (e.g., romantic communication with someone other than their spouse), which were described quite often in the current

study. Another noteworthy result associated with RQ2 is that the other top reported type of moral conflict, authority over assets of equal ownership, has not been identified in previous literature. This finding sheds light on the possibility that those in interpersonal relationships may experience unique types of moral conflict, such as authority over assets of equal ownership, due to the interdependent nature of their relationships. For example, those who experience this type of conflict may be confronted with issues such as how to manage joint finances or what type of school they should send their children to (e.g., public vs private).

Of the types of moral conflicts that have been identified in previous research, individuals reported utilitarian, care/beneficence, and free will/determinism the least. It is possible that individuals may be less likely to pursue their individual wants and desires through action, despite what the common good is (e.g., utilitarian), than by expressing their differing viewpoints/opinions verbally (i.e., autonomy) due to a high level of investment in their marriage. In other words, though individuals may want to engage in a behavior that their partner does not approve of, they may opt not to do so for the sake of the relationship. Similarly, conflicts over care/beneficence may occur in marriages relatively infrequently because they involve opinions or behaviors which cause physical or psychological pain for another person. As researchers have noted, both physiological and psychological safety needs are essential to the success of a marriage. If basic safety needs for each partner are not met, individuals will most likely have a difficult time filling other needs (e.g., love, esteem, self-actualization) (Finkel, 2015; Poduska, 1992). Thus, conflicts over care/beneficence may be more prevalent in couples that have

experienced divorce, rather than those who have been able to continue with their marriage despite episodes of moral conflict.

Although it is possible people may not experience these three types of conflicts as frequently as others, the degree to which individuals experience these types of conflicts is still unclear because the current study only asked people to describe one moral conflict. Another possibility is that individuals may experience these conflicts just as often as the other types of moral conflict investigated in this study but may not perceive these types of conflicts as having a moral nature as frequently as others. It is also possible that people may feel less comfortable sharing the details of these conflicts, do not feel as confident recalling their partner's behaviors, or do not find these conflicts as particularly memorable, in comparison to other types of moral conflict.

Research question three revealed that individuals perceived their partner as using integrative communication strategies such as self-disclosure, open discussion, and attempts to talk about the problem to reach an understanding of their viewpoint frequently during moral conflict. This may imply that although moral conflicts may be perceived as nearly impossible to resolve, couples are often able to identify that they are still important to talk about and are willing to at least try to constructively work through the conflict for the sake of the relationship. Though individuals may not agree with their partner's behaviors or viewpoint, they may be open to hearing their partner's side. Respondents also noted their partner used expressions of negative affect quite often during moral conflict. Inasmuch as this is the case, that moral conflict episodes between marital partners may involve intense emotions (e.g., sadness, frustration, vulnerability,

hurt). However, it is still unclear exactly what types of negative affect expressions are displayed and if these displays are apparent during all types of moral conflict.

Just as participants rarely reported conflicts over physiological and psychological harm (i.e., care/beneficence), participants also reported violent communication during conflict less frequently in comparison to other types of communication strategies. In some cases, individuals who perceive their partner as using violent communication during conflict (e.g., domestic abuse), feel it is the "final straw" in their marriage and seek divorce (Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, & Markman, 2013). Alternatively, it also is possible that participants experiencing violence in the context of their relationship did not participate in the study. In addition to violent communication, participants also reported using avoidant strategies less often than other approaches. One explanation for this finding may be that marital partners, as opposed to those involved in other types of relationships, may find it relatively challenging to use avoidant strategies during moral conflict since it may be difficult to create physical distance or ignore someone that they are cohabitating with.

Like RQ1, the fourth research question explored associations between similar perceptions of the moral nature of the conflict and perceptions of the moral interaction. RQ4 found that there was a positive association between the perceived similarly of the moral nature of the conflict and negative affect. In other words, individuals who believed that their partner also thought that they were engaged in a conflict that had a moral nature, often perceived their partner as displaying negative emotions during the interaction (i.e., crying, sulking, acting depressed). In addition, these individuals noted

that their partners used avoidant behaviors (e.g., becoming silent, acting like they didn't care, pretending nothing was wrong) less often. The combination of these findings suggests that when partners agree that a conflict has a moral nature, they may have a tendency to confront the conflict directly (either constructively or destructively) by expressing intense emotions (i.e., crying, venting frustration, appearing depression).

H1a and H1b further investigated the associations between perceptions of integrative and distributive communication strategies used by a partner during moral conflict and perceptions of the features of moral conflict. Some results from H1 align with prior literature which suggests that partners who constructively communicate during conflict (who use integrative strategies) will be unlikely to try to also harm the other during conflict, while those who are engaged in destructive communication management (who use distributive strategies) may be likely to intentionally upset the other during conflict (Sillars, 1980; Sillars et al., 1982). Though there was no association between integrative tactics and the perceived difficulty of resolving the moral conflict, results demonstrated that those who used distributive tactics often perceived attempts to find a resolution as a failure and future resolution of the conflict as hopeless (i.e., difficulty to resolve). Taken together, these findings suggest that using integrative communication during moral conflict may not always lead to a foreseeable easy resolution. By contrast, the study indicates that using distributive communication may be more reliably destructive because it is associated with perceptions of a moral conflict as being impossible to resolve.

Interestingly, individuals' perceptions of their partner's integrative or distributive tactics during a moral conflict were not linked to issue centrality, interminability, moral attenuation, or rhetorical attention. These results suggest that individuals' opinions of whether or not they personally perceived the conflict as significant, their viewpoint as different than their partner's viewpoint, their viewpoint as superior, and their partner's language as being clear, may not vary based on their partner's positive or negative communication strategies. If, indeed, moral conflicts are closely linked to individuals' identity and deeply rooted in their beliefs, it is plausible that people may feel the conflict is important, that positions differ on the issue, and that their perceptions are "right" regardless of how their partner responds during the conflict.

In exploring expressions of negative affect further, the results from RQ5 revealed a positive association between negative affect and (a) issue centrality and (b) motivation to harm. More specifically, those who felt their partner was expressing negative emotions during conflict tended to perceive the conflict as important. Further, they were also more likely to perceive themselves and their partner as trying to upset each other during the conflict. These results are not particularly surprising considering that people are likely to assume they upset another person during a difficult interaction, if that person is outwardly displaying his or her hurt (e.g., crying, sulking, expressing displeasure on their face). Another possible explanation for these results could be that although individuals are aware that they are upsetting their partner during a moral conflict, they may not attempt put an end to the conflict since they perceive this particular issue as central to their beliefs and significant in their life. It is important to note, however, that results from H1

(described previously) did not find a positive association been distributive tactics and issue centrality or a negative association between integrative strategies and issue centrality. In other words, the findings of H1 suggest that there was not relationship between issue centrality and (a) distribution communication or (b) integrative communication, while in RQ5 there was a positive association between issue centrality and negative affect. This finding supports existing literature which indicates that expressions of negative affect may be interpreted by a partner as positive (e.g., integrative), negative (e.g., distributive), or neutral (Waite-Miller & Roloff, 2006).

The final research question and hypothesis examined the link between perceived communication strategies during moral conflict and relational satisfaction. As expected, individuals who perceived their partner as using integrative strategies were more satisfied with their relationship, whereas those who perceived their partner as using distributive tactics reported lower levels of relational satisfaction (H2a and H2b). While controlling for the other five communication strategies and the remaining control variables (i.e., marital duration, time since conflict had occurred, similar cultural and religious background, cultural and religious importance, event importance, previous marriage), significant relationships were found between relational satisfaction and two types of strategies: expressions of negative affect [7] and avoidance/denial [8]. Interestingly, these are

[7] The five communication strategies that were controlled for while assessing negative affect were: active distancing, avoidance/denial, violent communication, integrative communication and distributive communication.

[8] The five communication strategies that were controlled for while assessing avoidance/denial were: active distancing, negative affect, violent communication, integrative communication and distributive communication.

the same communication strategies that were found significant in RQ4. The emergence of these strategies as significant in both research questions suggests that there may be a link between (a) satisfaction in a relationship and (b) the extent to which partners perceive they agree on the moral nature of a conflict with partner's display of negative feelings and avoidance/denial during a moral conflict. However, empirical claims of a link between these communication strategies (i.e., expressions of negative effect, avoidance/denial) with (a) relational satisfaction and (b) perceived similar viewpoints of the moral nature of a conflict should not be made without future exploration.

Findings from RQ6 demonstrated that people were likely to feel less satisfied with their relationship when their partners used avoidance or denial during moral conflict. Although these results fit with prior research (Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Sillars et al., 1982), a more compelling finding is the positive association between relational satisfaction and expressions of negative affect. This latter association suggests that people may value it when their partner expresses insecurities or emotions (e.g., crying, appearing hurt) during a particularly challenging conflict. Though emotions such as these are not perceived as positive in all situations, partners may interpret these public displays of emotion as an indication of their partner being vulnerable or open. As previous research shows, vulnerability in romantic relationships often increases feelings of relational closeness (Altman & Dalmas, 1973). Further, those who feel closer to their partners are also more likely to be satisfied in their relationship. While this study provides possible contributions concerning the positive influence of expressions of negative affect on

relationships, the association between negative affect during interpersonal conflicts and relational outcomes is still unclear.

Limitations

Despite the meaningful contributions the current inquiry provides, there are several important limitations to consider when interpreting the findings of this study. First, perceptions of the moral conflict were gathered from only one partner in a relationship, rather than both. Including both partners' perspectives would allow researchers to determine whether the dyad agrees on the moral nature of the conflict as well as the communication strategies used during the moral conflict episode. With this said, assessing individuals' perceptions of the moral conflict and their partner's behaviors during the conflict is a useful way to explore the types of moral conflicts that occur in marriage. Further, it advances literature by showing how individuals' perceptions of the communication strategies used by their partner may influence perceptions of the conflict and relational satisfaction.

Another limitation of this study is that the definitions and categories for types of moral conflict as well as the features of moral conflict are new. Although prior research and theory were used to derive the definitions and categories, they were examined for the first time in the current study. Given this, the results of the present study should be taken with discretion until future research replicates its claims.

Despite the use of numerous control variables, it is possible that other factors may have influenced the results. For example, it is unclear how other interactions, both prior to and after, this particular moral conflict may have influenced perceptions of the conflict

as well as perceptions of the partner. One possibility is that individuals who experienced moral conflicts on prior occasions were more prepared to manage the conflict than were those who had not engaged in similar conflicts concerning this issue. However, it is also possible that prior knowledge of the conflict created internal uncertainty and tension, thus exacerbating the problem before the interaction between the pair occurred. Further, it is unclear how interactions that occurred after the described event may have influenced perceptions of the moral conflict. It is also possible that the frequency of overall conflict in the relationship may have influenced behaviors during the conflict, perceptions of the conflict, and marital satisfaction. Though data on some of these variables were collected, they were not analyzed in the current study and will be used for future research.

In addition to the aforementioned limitations, this study presents several methodological challenges. Because the data were self-reports, it is possible (if not probable) that the reported perceptions of the partner's behavior were inaccurate. Further, it is likely that the current study suffers from recall bias. Despite having individuals choose moral conflicts that were memorable to them, it is unlikely that they could remember exactly what behaviors were displayed or the frequency of those behaviors. Given that this study found that people experience moral conflict in their marriage, scholars should investigate moral conflicts concurrently (e.g., in a laboratory setting) to strengthen the validity of the current findings. Although reports of moral conflict features and of partners' behavior during conflict are biased, the assessments described in this study make a noteworthy contribution to existing research. The intention of the current investigation was to measure how individuals experienced a memorable interaction in

their life and how their perceptions of this experience influenced their perceptions of themselves, their partner, and the relationship. Investigating moral conflict from an individual perspective may allow researchers to better understand how moral conflict may be associated with threats to individuals' identity, negative attributions made toward their partner, or outcomes of the relationship.

Future Directions

While the results of this study provide a foundation for moral conflict research in interpersonal relationships, there are numerous routes other scholars can take to expand this inquiry. First, the present study only explored moral conflict in marriages. It did not address possible moral conflicts experienced in other types of interpersonal relationships. Subsequent research should examine how people in other dyadic relationships experience moral conflict (e.g., close friends, family members, roommates, dating partners). It is possible that the types of moral conflicts that occur as well as the most common communication strategies used to address these conflicts may differ based on the type of relationship. For example, family members may encounter disagreements over loyalty (e.g., physical/emotional betrayal) less frequently than marital partners, because their relationships tend to be less physically intimate. However, it is possible that family members may experience conflicts about care/beneficences more often considering bullying occurs quite often among siblings and other family members (Wolke, Tippett, & Dantchev, 2015). Further, those who report moral conflict with a family member may perceive the other as using avoidant/denial or active distancing strategies more frequently given that they may not necessarily be cohabitating with a family member. Thus, they

may feel that they will be less likely to have to confront similar episodes of conflict over this issue in the future.

As mentioned previously, a constraint of this study is that data were gathered from only one partner's perspective. Dyadic data would be fruitful to investigate the extent to which partners agree the conflict is of a moral nature, the type of moral conflict that occurred, and their perceptions of self and other during the conflict. In addition, the current study asked participants to recall one memorable interaction that focused on a moral conflict. However, the data showed that many of these conflicts were still unresolved or required multiple interactions before they were resolved. Using longitudinal data to investigate how moral conflicts are perceived and develop over several episodes may help address the factors which lead to conflict escalation and intractability versus conflict resolution and relational prosperity.

Although data on other types of serious conflicts were collected in the current study, they were not included in data analysis. Forthcoming research should examine the similarities and differences between moral conflict and other types of serious conflict (i.e., severity, difficulty to resolve, perceptions of partner behavior during conflict, etc.). Such analyses may help clarify how to define moral conflict in interpersonal relationships and the most effective ways to confront various types of moral conflict. Lastly, though types of moral conflict and strategies used during conflict were assessed, it is unclear if certain communication strategies are more effective than others during specific types of moral conflicts. Researchers might examine whether, for example, expressions of

negative affect during conflicts over *autonomy* lead to more destructive outcomes than expressions of negative affect during conflicts about *truthfulness*.

A clear understanding of what defines a particular conflict as having a moral nature is still absent in literature. Subsequent research should further explore what defines a moral conflict, particularly in interpersonal relationships, and how these conflicts may differ from those experienced in other types of relationships. Due to the complexity of moral conflict, it may be equally or more beneficial to focus less on what defines a conflict as moral and more on specific communication strategies that can be used to overcome the intractable nature of moral conflicts. As Littlejohn and Cole (2013) suggest, "Moral conflict, although a compelling challenge in society, opens rich opportunities for interpersonal learning, improved relationships and creative collaboration" (p. 585). Furthermore, they state, "We need to create meeting places where we can explore the moral orders that lie at the heart of our actions, where we can learn important things about ourselves and others, where we can join in common endeavor, and where we can create futures of mutual benefit" (p. 585). This study sought to take a step toward understanding how the communication strategies used during a particularly difficult interaction can contribute to either improving an interpersonal relationship or leave a couple dissatisfied with a potentially unresolved conflict.

Table 1: Factor Analysis Examining the Features of Moral Conflict

Items	I	*II*	*III*	*IV*	*V*	*VI*
Difficulty to Resolve						
I felt hopeless regarding the chance that this conflict would ever be resolved.	.84					
I felt any attempt to resolve the conflict was doomed to fail.	.85					
I felt the future of the conflict was bleak.	.84					
Nothing I tried would work to resolve the conflict.	.80					
Anything I tried to do to resolve the conflict failed.	.84					
I felt this conflict was difficult to resolve.	.80					
Issue Centrality						
This issue was significant to my life.		.81				
This issue was central to my beliefs.		.84				
This issue was important to my life.		.91				
Motivation to harm						
During the interaction, my partner and I tried to hurt each other's feelings.			.88			
During the interaction, my partner and I tried to upset each other.			.89			
Interminability						
My partner and I had different viewpoints.				.77		
My partner and I disagreed on how to resolve the conflict.				.66		
My partner and I disagreed about the issue.				.81		
My partner and I disagreed on how to manage the conflict.				.66		
My partner and I had different positions to on the topic.				.83		
Moral Attenuation						
My viewpoint was more virtuous than my partner's viewpoint.					.80	
My position had higher moral standards than my partner's position.					.82	
Rhetorical Attenuation						
I felt my partner's language was ambiguous.						.67

Table 1 cont.

It was difficult to understand my partner's viewpoint.						.73
I had limited understanding of my partner's moral perspective.						.84
My partner's argument was not clear.						.79
Eigenvalues	5.06	3.10	3.08	2.50	1.95	1.78
Percent of variance explained	23.00	14.07	14.02	11.34	8.88	8.08
Mean	4.07	4.91	2.92	5.45	3.69	3.68
Standard Deviation	1.83	1.58	1.92	1.23	1.67	1.66
Alpha Reliability	.96	.87	.95	.84	.90	.87

Table 2: Beta Coefficients and R2 Change for Prediction of Similar Perceptions of Moral Conflict

Difficulty to resolve

Predictor	Beta	R^2 Change
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.05*
Moral attenuation	.44*	
Issue centrality	-.02	
Motivation to harm	.15	
Interminability	.08	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.57**	
Step 3		.00
Difficulty to resolve	-.01	

Issue centrality

Predictor	Beta	R^2 Change
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.05*
Motivation to harm	.15	
Interminability	.08	
Moral attenuation	.44*	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.56**	
Difficulty to resolve	.-.01	
Step 3		.00
Issue centrality	-.02	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 2 contin.

Motivation to harm

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.04
Difficulty to resolve	.06	
Issue centrality	-.01	
Moral attenuation	.46*	
Interminability	.05	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.53**	
Step 3		.01
Motivation to harm	.15	.

Interminability

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.05*
Difficulty to resolve	.03	
Issue centrality	-.01	
Motivation to harm	.14	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.58**	
Moral attenuation	.46*	
Step 3		.004
Interminability	.08	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 2 contin.

Moral attenuation

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.03
Difficulty to resolve	.02	
Issue centrality	-.01	
Motivation to harm	.16	
Interminability	.09	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.17*	
Step 3		.02*
Moral attenuation	.44*	.

Rhetorical attenuation

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.02
Difficulty to resolve	-.02	
Issue centrality	.01	
Motivation to harm	.12	
Interminability	.09	
Moral attenuation	-.07	
Step 3		.04**
Rhetorical attenuation	-.57**	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 3: Types of Moral Conflicts

Type of moral conflict	Participant Example	Frequency
Truthfulness	"My wife wanted to cheat on our taxes. I disagreed. Eventually, she realized that was a bad idea."	.13.4%
Authority over assets of equal ownership	"The conflict was about not agreeing on if we should homeschool our children or not. I wanted to, and he wasn't so sure."	12.4%
Autonomy	"My husband does not believe in abortion under any circumstances, except rape. I, however, believe it is a woman's choice…"	12.9%
Loyalty	I had a bad conflict with my husband months ago when I caught him talking to an ex on Facebook. He told her that he loves her and always had. I confronted him about how he emotionally cheated. He denied that, saying there's no such thing.	12.5%
Community	She was upset that I did not stick up for her in a social situation, but I felt she knowingly brought it on herself.	10.7%
Equality	"I believe men and women are equals. That men should treat their wives well and not be so bossy. My husband is from Egypt and he is very bossy…He thinks men can be how they want with the woman because they are the man…"	9.8%
Authoritarian	"My husband tends to put his mother first in every decision he makes, no matter how it affects me. He says this is because the bible says it's what he should do. We read the same Bible, but I disagree with that."	9.4%
Utilitarian	"I didn't want my Wife to go out late out at night with her friends because I worry about something happening to her, and she feels that I'm being too protective over here and that's when we start having arguments."	8.0%
Care/Beneficence	"One day he just decided he didn't like our neighbor. Over time he decided he was a total loser, a waste of human life, and a danger to our house. he became cruel and belligerent"	8.0%
Free will/determinism	"My wife and I had a disagreement about the role poor people of color play in their own situation. She felt as though most people of color of poor is because they choose to. I have experienced many of the same barriers people report in terms of education, employment and acceptance. However, my wife felt that if I could overcome those barriers everyone could…"	1.8%

Table 4: Beta Coefficients and R2 Change for Prediction of Similar Perceptions of Moral Conflict

Active distancing

Predictor	Beta	R^2 Change
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.16**
Negative affect	.44**	
Integrative communication	.04	
Distributive communication	-.13	
Avoidance/denial	-.23**	
Violent communication	.11	
Step 3		.001
Active distancing	.05	.

Negative affect

Predictor	Beta	R^2 Change
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.07**
Active distancing	.21	
Integrative communication	.16*	
Distributive communication	-.07	
Avoidance/denial	-.24**	
Violent communication	.14	
Step 3		.09**
Negative affect	.42**	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 4 contin.

Integrative communication

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.16**
Negative affect	.43**	
Active distancing	.05	
Distributive communication	-.16	
Avoidance/denial	-.25**	
Violent communication	.11	
Step 3		.001
Integrative communication	.04	.

Distributive communication

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.15**
Negative affect	.40**	
Integrative communication	.06	
Active distancing	-.03	
Avoidance/denial	-.24**	
Violent communication	.08	
Step 3		.01
Distributive communication	-.15	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 4 contin.

Avoidance/denial

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.13**
Negative affect	.42**	
Integrative communication	.05	
Distributive communication	-.13	
Active distancing	-.08	
Violent communication	.05	
Step 3		.03**
Avoidance/denial	-.25**	.

Violent communication

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.02	
Similar cultural background	-.02	
Cultural importance	.18*	
Similar religious beliefs	-.02	
Religion importance	-.10	
Event importance	-.06	
Previous Marriage	-.08	
Step 2		.15**
Negative affect	.43**	
Integrative communication	.04	
Distributive communication	-.12	
Avoidance/denial	-.22**	
Active distancing	.06	
Step 3		.01
Violent communication	.11	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 5.1: Beta Coefficients and R2 Change for Prediction of Integrative Communication Strategies

Difficulty to resolve

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.05	
Similar cultural background	.08	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.12	
Religion importance	-.08	
Event importance	-.04	
Previous Marriage	-.06	
Step 2		.09**
Moral attenuation	-.14	
Issue centrality	.16	
Motivation to harm	-.19*	
Interminability	.14	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.004	
Step 3		.001
Difficulty to resolve	-.04	.

Issue centrality

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.05	
Similar cultural background	.08	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.12	
Religion importance	-.08	
Event importance	-.04	
Previous Marriage	-.06	
Step 2		.08**
Motivation to harm	-.17*	
Interminability	.16*	
Moral attenuation	-.13	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.03	
Difficulty to resolve	-.003	
Step 3		.01
Issue centrality	.17	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 5.1 contin.

Motivation to harm

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.05	
Similar cultural background	.08	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.12	
Religion importance	-.08	
Event importance	-.04	
Previous Marriage	-.06	
Step 2		.08**
Difficulty to resolve	-.12	
Issue centrality	.16	
Moral attenuation	-.15	
Interminability	.17*	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.04	
Step 3		.02*
Motivation to harm	-.18*	.

Interminability

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.05	
Similar cultural background	.08	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.12	
Religion importance	-.08	
Event importance	-.04	
Previous Marriage	-.06	
Step 2		.08**
Difficulty to resolve	.03	
Issue centrality	.18*	
Motivation to harm	-.20*	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.02	
Moral attenuation	-.10	
Step 3		.02
Interminability	.14	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 5.1 contin.

Moral attenuation

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.05	
Similar cultural background	.08	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.12	
Religion importance	-.08	
Event importance	-.04	
Previous Marriage	-.06	
Step 2		.09**
Difficulty to resolve	-.05	
Issue centrality	.16	
Motivation to harm	-.18*	
Interminability	.14	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.12	
Step 3		.002
Moral attenuation	-.14	.

Rhetorical attenuation

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.04
Marital duration	-.10	
Time since conflict occurred	.05	
Similar cultural background	.08	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.12	
Religion importance	-.08	
Event importance	-.04	
Previous Marriage	-.06	
Step 2		.09**
Difficulty to resolve	-.04	
Issue centrality	.17	
Motivation to harm	-.18	
Interminability	.14	
Moral attenuation	-.14*	
Step 3		.00
Rhetorical attenuation	.00	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 5.2: Beta Coefficients and R2 Change for Prediction of Distributive Communication Strategies

Difficulty to resolve

Predictor	Beta	R^2 Change
Step 1		.11**
Marital duration	-.15	
Time since conflict occurred	-.02	
Similar cultural background	-.07	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.01	
Religion importance	-.01	
Event importance	.29**	
Previous Marriage	-.11	
Step 2		.44**
Moral attenuation	-.19	
Issue centrality	.04	
Motivation to harm	.66**	
Interminability	.15**	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.18	
Step 3		.01*
Difficulty to resolve	.17*	.

Issue centrality

Predictor	Beta	R^2 Change
Step 1		.11**
Marital duration	-.15	
Time since conflict occurred	-.02	
Similar cultural background	-.07	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.01	
Religion importance	-.01	
Event importance	.29**	
Previous Marriage	-.11	
Step 2		.45**
Motivation to harm	.61**	
Interminability	.10	
Moral attenuation	-.22	
Rhetorical attenuation	.17	
Difficulty to resolve	.17*	
Step 3		.00
Issue centrality	.01	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 5.2 contin.

Motivation to harm

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.11**
Marital duration	-.15	
Time since conflict occurred	-.02	
Similar cultural background	-.07	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.01	
Religion importance	-.01	
Event importance	.29**	
Previous Marriage	-.11	
Step 2		.23**
Difficulty to resolve	.42**	
Issue centrality	.02	
Moral attenuation	-.16	
Interminability	.01	
Rhetorical attenuation	.32	
Step 3		.22**
Motivation to harm	.61**	.

Interminability

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.11**
Marital duration	-.15	
Time since conflict occurred	-.02	
Similar cultural background	-.07	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.01	
Religion importance	-.01	
Event importance	.29**	
Previous Marriage	-.11	
Step 2		.44**
Difficulty to resolve	.22**	
Issue centrality	.02	
Motivation to harm	.59**	
Rhetorical attenuation	.15	
Moral attenuation	-.19	
Step 3		.01
Interminability	.10	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 5.2 contin.

Moral attenuation

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.11**
Marital duration	-.15	
Time since conflict occurred	-.02	
Similar cultural background	-.07	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.01	
Religion importance	-.01	
Event importance	.29**	
Previous Marriage	-.11	
Step 2		.44**
Difficulty to resolve	.16*	
Issue centrality	.01	
Motivation to harm	.60**	
Interminability	.09	
Rhetorical attenuation	-.03	
Step 3		.01
Moral attenuation	-.22	.

Rhetorical attenuation

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.11**
Marital duration	-.15	
Time since conflict occurred	-.02	
Similar cultural background	-.07	
Cultural importance	.02	
Similar religious beliefs	.01	
Religion importance	-.01	
Event importance	.29**	
Previous Marriage	-.11	
Step 2		.45**
Difficulty to resolve	.17*	
Issue centrality	.00	
Motivation to harm	.61**	
Interminability	.10	
Moral attenuation	-.07	
Step 3		.003
Rhetorical attenuation	.166	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 6: Beta Coefficients and R2 Change for Prediction of Expressions of Negative Affect

Difficulty to resolve

Predictor	Beta	R^2 Change
Step 1		.14**
Marital duration	-.18*	
Time since conflict occurred	.01	
Similar cultural background	-.06	
Cultural importance	-.07	
Similar religious beliefs	.07	
Religion importance	.01	
Event importance	.31**	
Previous Marriage	-.15*	
Step 2		.17**
Moral attenuation	-.06	
Issue centrality	.30**	
Motivation to harm	.30**	
Interminability	.07	
Rhetorical attenuation	.10	
Step 3		.01
Difficulty to resolve	.13	.

Issue centrality

Predictor	Beta	R^2 Change
Step 1		.14**
Marital duration	-.18*	
Time since conflict occurred	.01	
Similar cultural background	-.06	
Cultural importance	-.07	
Similar religious beliefs	.07	
Religion importance	.01	
Event importance	.31**	
Previous Marriage	-.15*	
Step 2		.14**
Motivation to harm	.27**	
Interminability	.05	
Moral attenuation	-.08	
Rhetorical attenuation	.04	
Difficulty to resolve	.19*	
Step 3		.04**
Issue centrality	.28**	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 6 contin.

Motivation to harm

Predictor	Beta	R^2 Change
Step 1		.14**
Marital duration	-.18*	
Time since conflict occurred	.01	
Similar cultural background	-.06	
Cultural importance	-.07	
Similar religious beliefs	.07	
Religion importance	.01	
Event importance	.31**	
Previous Marriage	-.15*	
Step 2		.13**
Difficulty to resolve	.24**	
Issue centrality	.28**	
Moral attenuation	-.06	
Interminability	-.01	
Rhetorical attenuation	.15	
Step 3		.04**
Motivation to harm	.26**	.

Interminability

Predictor	Beta	R^2 Change
Step 1		.14**
Marital duration	-.18*	
Time since conflict occurred	.01	
Similar cultural background	-.06	
Cultural importance	-.07	
Similar religious beliefs	.07	
Religion importance	.01	
Event importance	.31**	
Previous Marriage	-.15*	
Step 2		.17**
Difficulty to resolve	.14	
Issue centrality	.28**	
Motivation to harm	.26**	
Rhetorical attenuation	.09	
Moral attenuation	-.08	
Step 3		.00
Interminability	.03	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 6 contin.

Moral attenuation

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.14**
Marital duration	-.18*	
Time since conflict occurred	.01	
Similar cultural background	-.06	
Cultural importance	-.07	
Similar religious beliefs	.07	
Religion importance	.01	
Event importance	.31**	
Previous Marriage	-.15*	
Step 2		.17**
Difficulty to resolve	.13	
Issue centrality	.27	
Motivation to harm	.26	
Interminability	.02	
Rhetorical attenuation	.01	
Step 3		.001
Moral attenuation	-.09	.

Rhetorical attenuation

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.14**
Marital duration	-.18*	
Time since conflict occurred	.01	
Similar cultural background	-.06	
Cultural importance	-.07	
Similar religious beliefs	.07	
Religion importance	.01	
Event importance	.31**	
Previous Marriage	-.15*	
Step 2		.17**
Difficulty to resolve	.13	
Issue centrality	.27**	
Motivation to harm	.26**	
Interminability	.03	
Moral attenuation	-.01	
Step 3		.001
Rhetorical attenuation	.09	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 7: Beta Coefficients and R2 Change for Prediction of Relational Satisfaction

Active distancing

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.10**
Marital duration	.07	
Time since conflict occurred	.08	
Similar cultural background	.12	
Cultural importance	.08	
Similar religious beliefs	.18*	
Religion importance	-.06	
Event importance	-.15*	
Previous Marriage	-.02	
Step 2		.31**
Negative affect	.18*	
Integrative communication	.16**	
Distributive communication	-.39**	
Avoidance/denial	-.23**	
Violent communication	-.09	
Step 3		.001
Active distancing	.04	.

Negative affect

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.10**
Marital duration	.07	
Time since conflict occurred	.08	
Similar cultural background	.12	
Cultural importance	.08	
Similar religious beliefs	.18	
Religion importance	-.06	
Event importance	-.15	
Previous Marriage	-.02	
Step 2		.29**
Active distancing	.03	
Integrative communication	.22**	
Distributive communication	-.33**	
Avoidance/denial	-.21**	
Violent communication	-.07	
Step 3		.02*
Negative affect	.19*	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 7 contin.

Integrative communication

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.10**
Marital duration	.07	
Time since conflict occurred	.08	
Similar cultural background	.12	
Cultural importance	.08	
Similar religious beliefs	.18	
Religion importance	-.06	
Event importance	-.15	
Previous Marriage	-.02	
Step 2		.29**
Negative affect	.26**	
Active distancing	-.05	
Distributive communication	-.42**	
Avoidance/denial	-.24**	
Violent communication	-.09	
Step 3		.02**
Integrative communication	.16**	.

Distributive communication

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.10**
Marital duration	.07	
Time since conflict occurred	.08	
Similar cultural background	.12	
Cultural importance	.08	
Similar religious beliefs	.18	
Religion importance	-.06	
Event importance	-.15	
Previous Marriage	-.02	
Step 2		.26**
Negative affect	.14	
Integrative communication	.22**	
Active distancing	-.25**	
Avoidance/denial	-.19*	
Violent communication	-.16*	
Step 3		.05**
Distributive communication	-.37	.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 7 contin.

Avoidance/denial

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.10**
Marital duration	.07	
Time since conflict occurred	.08	
Similar cultural background	.12	
Cultural importance	.08	
Similar religious beliefs	.18	
Religion importance	-.06	
Event importance	-.15	
Previous Marriage	-.02	
Step 2		.29**
Negative affect	.18*	
Integrative communication	.18**	
Distributive communication	-.35**	
Active distancing	-.16	
Violent communication	-.14*	
Step 3		.02**
Avoidance/denial	-.22**	

Violent communication

Predictor	**Beta**	**R^2 Change**
Step 1		.10**
Marital duration	.07	
Time since conflict occurred	.08	
Similar cultural background	.12	
Cultural importance	.08	
Similar religious beliefs	.18	
Religion importance	-.06	
Event importance	-.15	
Previous Marriage	-.02	
Step 2		.30**
Negative affect	.18*	
Integrative communication	.16**	
Distributive communication	-.40**	
Avoidance/denial	-.24**	
Active distancing	-.05	
Step 3		.01
Violent communication	-.09	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Figure 1: Types of Moral Conflict

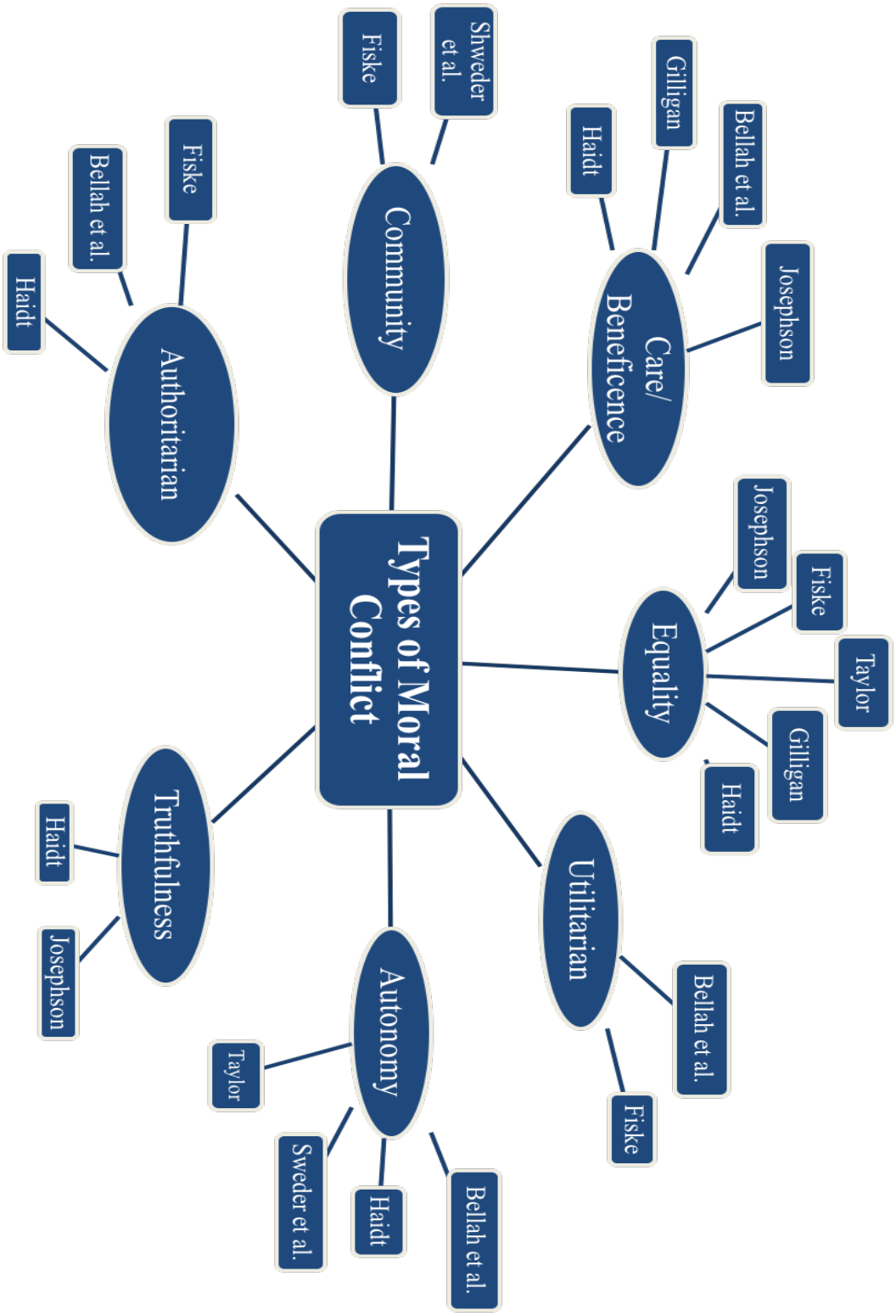
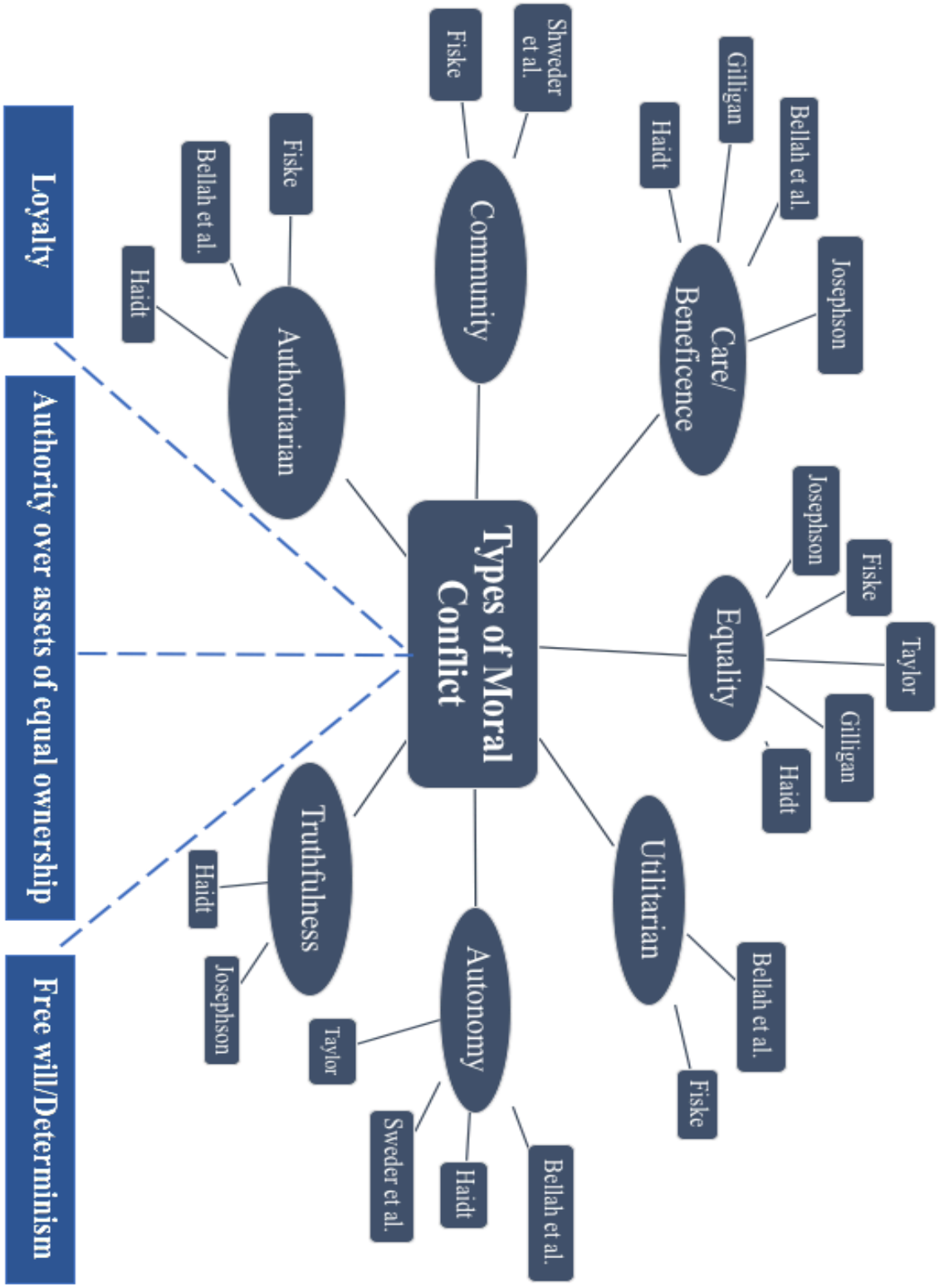


Figure 2: Types of Moral Conflict in Marriage



Appendices

Appendix A

Moral Conflict Features

Instructions: *Please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements regarding the moral conflict interaction.*

1=strongly disagree *7=strongly agree*

During the interaction…

Intractability.

Hopelessness.

felt hopeless regarding the chance that this conflict would ever be resolved.
I felt any attempt to resolve the conflict was doomed to fail.
I felt the future of the conflict was bleak.

Resistance to resolution.

Nothing I tried would work to resolve the conflict.
Anything I tried to do to resolve the conflict failed.
I felt this conflict was difficult to resolve.

Intensity.

This argument was very heated.*
This interaction was intense.*

Issue centrality.

This issue was significant to my life.
This issue was central to my beliefs.
This issue was important to my life.

Motivation to harm.

During the interaction, my partner and I tried to hurt each other's feelings.
During the interaction, my partner and I tried to upset each other.

Interminability.

My partner and I had different viewpoints.
My partner and I disagreed on how to resolve the conflict.
My partner and I disagreed about the issue.
My partner and I disagreed on how to manage the conflict.
My partner and I had different positions to on the topic.

Moral attenuation.

My viewpoint was more virtuous than my partner's viewpoint.
My position had higher moral standards than my partner's position.
My partner thought their beliefs were superior.*
My partner thought their ideas were right. *

Rhetorical attenuation.

I felt my partner's language was ambiguous.
It was difficult to understand my partner's viewpoint.
I had limited understanding of my partner's moral perspective.
My partner's argument was not clear.
*These items were dropped due to low or double loadings.

Appendix B

Interactive Responses to Jealousy (Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995)

Instructions: In the following section, we would like you to keep in mind the **moral conflict** episode that was selected. Please indicate the degree to which you perceive **your partner** displayed certain behaviors during the moral conflict interaction. If you are unsure please indicate your best guess.
*Note: We are **not** interested in the perceptions of your own behavior.*

1= Never 4=Sometimes 7= Very Frequently

During the conflict my partner…

1. Physically pulled away from me
2. Gave me cold or dirty looks
3. Decreased affection toward me
4. Ignored me
5. Gave me the "silent treatment"
6. Displayed insecurities to me
7. Vented their frustration with me
8. Appeared hurt in front of me
9. Appeared sad and depressed in front of me
10. Cried or sulked in front of me
11. Wore his/her displeasure on his/her face for me to see
12. Explained his/her viewpoint to me
13. Disclosed his/her moral viewpoint to me
14. Discussed the moral conflict with me
15. Tried to talk about the problem and reach an understanding
16. Calmly questioned me about my actions and viewpoint
17. Yelled or cursed at me
18. Acted rude toward me
19. Made hurtful or abusive comments to me
20. Quarreled or argued with me
21. Confronted me in an accusatory manner
22. Got quiet and didn't say much
23. Became silent around me
24. Acted like he/she didn't care
25. Pretended nothing was wrong
26. Used physical force
27. Threatened to harm me
28. Was physically violent
29. Pushed, shoved, or hit me

Appendix C

Marital Opinion Questionnaire (MOQ) (Huston, T., McHale, S., & Crouter A., 1986)

Between each pair of adjectives, please describe your relationship with your marital partner. We would like you to think about your relational life with this person over the last two months and use the following words and phrases to describe it.

1. Miserable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Enjoyable
2. Hopeful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Discouraging
3. Free	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Tied down
4. Empty	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Full
5. Interesting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Boring
6. Rewarding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Disappointing
7. Doesn't give me much chance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Brings out the best in me
8. Lonely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Friendly
9. Hard	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Easy
10. Worthwhile	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Useless

All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied have you been with your relationship with this person over the last two months?

11. Completely satisfied	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Completely dissatisfied

Appendix D

Event Importance (Afifi & Metts 1998)

1. This was very important relationship event
2. This was a minor relationship event*
3. This was a major relationship event
4. This was an unimportant relationship event*
5. This was a significant relationship event.

**Items were reverse coded*.

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